

PROCESSES AND CONTEXTS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, the paper by Kathryn Kullasepp about psychology professional identity changes on psychology students is critically reviewed, paying special attention to its theoretical perspective. Some related theoretical approaches such as conceptual change research are proposed. Some contributions related to this research conclusions are provided, which from our point of view may be further analysed and studied in future development of this study.

Keywords: Professional identity, conceptual change, mental representations.

The paper by Kullasepp is about the construction of professional identity in Estonian psychology students. The issue is discussed from a socio-cultural perspective that assumes the construction of identity as a dialogical process, where mental representations have a fundamental role. According to a dialogical perspective, the construction of identity can be analyzed in comparison to “actual others” and “imagined others”. The analysis of the imaginary world constructed by individuals may be a relevant source of study. One of the interesting aspects mentioned is that through the study of mental representations of the individuals under this present investigation, certain conceptions about socio cultural environment can be drawn. However, it should be stressed that these conceptions are

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mediated by the narratives and discourse used by the students interviewed, who are the main source of information and analysis.

One of the distinct characteristics of the socio-cultural perspective is the dialectic notion of internalization versus externalization. This refers to the special relationship that individuals have with their socio-cultural environment. It is worth mentioning that this perspective does not give way to the determinism that simplifies the relationship between individuals and the environment. In this conception, the influence of the socio-cultural environment does not represent an element that unilaterally determines the individual. Personal characteristics of the individuals are capable of rejecting, interrupting or slowly accepting external influences in an interactional process. As the role of the individual and her life history is taken into account, there is a dialectical relationship between the individual and the socio-cultural environment. This process can be observed in the active role that the individual has in the construction of her own identity. Thus, it can be understood why under certain conditions, the individual is reluctant to changes that situate her “personal certainties” at risk. Her relationship with the socio-cultural environment may be analysed in terms of specific “negotiations” depending on the context.

Moreover, as Kullasepp clearly shows in her theoretical perspective, professional identity is conceived as a dynamical process, based on the interrelation between the socio-cultural environment and the individual. This theoretical framework will allow understanding the possible changes in the representations of psychology students regarding their own “professional identity”. In this respect, it should be stressed the merit of conducting a longitudinal study. Firstly, because this type of research is hardly carried out, and secondly, because it allows to observe the possible changes in the representations of individuals according to their personal and academic life. Similarly, it would be interesting for this present study to further analyse the data obtained on these students once they have graduated and they could be working in their professional field.

Taking into account that this paper considers precisely possible changes or transformations on subjects’ representations, we think it is interesting to establish a relation to some notions

arising from the field of conceptual change (Schnotz, Vosniadou and Carretero, 1999; Vosniadou, 2006). As a matter of fact, we believe this relation may contribute with theoretical aspects in the further development of the present study. Conceptual change research has focused in detail on how transformations between “new” and “old / prior” knowledge are produced in the human mind. One of the main issues addressed by conceptual change is whether there is resistance to “new” knowledge. It is intriguing to observe that in this field of study there is a growing influence of contributions that are based, directly or indirectly, on socio-cultural studies. For instance, some authors pointed out that the “new” knowledge does not replace “old” knowledge but in fact the individual, throughout her process of change, is able to differentiate diverse types of knowledge to be used in particular different contexts (Vosniadou, 2006). Therefore, from the conceptual change viewpoint, the progressive acquisition of professional identity as a psychologist would consist of incorporating increasingly more sophisticated conceptual tools that will enable the individual to apply them in specialized professional contexts, although she may still have very simple prior ideas on the same topics, which may be used in daily life. Thus, the longitudinal study carried out by Kullasepp may lead to further investigation on the relevance of students’ prior knowledge about psychology before starting university and to observe which have been the possibilities of conceptual changes emergence in future studies.

As we have already mentioned, the aim of the present paper is very interesting since, at present the construction of identity, – namely national, cultural, gender, etc -is one of the main subjects of study in human sciences and it has great social relevance worldwide. In this respect, without any doubt, professional identity constitutes one of the essential aspects of personal identity, and nowadays contradictory, intriguing situations are taking place in the field of professional identity. For example, while various prospective studies indicate that most university students will change their professional careers throughout their working life, many of them however, still regard themselves as part of only one professional activity. In this way, a recently graduate student who claims, “I am a psychologist”, in fact should claim, “I am currently a psychologist (for the time being)”.

As far as empirical aspects are concerned, we think that it is important to mention that the comparison of students' prior ideas with their representations after one academic year is highly productive. Nevertheless, we would like to express our criticism about the use of the notion "professional identity" for first year students. We understand that professional identity is acquired while working in one's profession, where the professional gains experience in a field determined by codes and activities.

Therefore, the term "cultural" identity should be proposed for the analysis of first year psychology students.

The paper aims at finding evidence on dynamical changes in students' conceptions and opinions related to their professional identity. These changes would then be clearly exposed when showing differences in students' narratives after one year of academic study. Once evidence of change of representation has been found, the hypotheses from which the field study was conducted should have been mentioned in the paper. Has evidence to support these hypotheses been found? Or did they have to be modified after the field study was concluded?

Regarding the transformation of professional identity in the individuals surveyed, Kullasepp approaches it from two levels: 1) socio-institutional representations, and 2) internalized personal representations. Professional identity is described as an open and constructed system, where the impact of external factors must be taken into consideration. In particular, the academic institution and the course of studies are given great importance as privileged sources of influence in the construction of professional identity. The university would contribute to students' identity conformation through a series of representations. Then, students will incorporate these representations according to their own internal framework and they would serve as "guide" for their thinking.

We observe that Kullasepp's analysis may overemphasize the influence that university plays on students as the only transformational factor. Kullasepp claims that after one year of academic study, students have changed their representations on what it means to be a psychologist. We wonder why that transformation takes place. Do both the institutional

background and the psychology syllabus only influence it? We believe that the transformation taking place in psychology students should be studied in a more detailed way. At first, one of the main aspects to be highlighted is that their narratives describe their opinion of what a psychologist is through negative forms (“They do not solve problems, they do not read peoples’ minds”), etc. We wonder if this form of narrative is not related to the fact that they think that their identity as psychology students is questioned or stigmatized in the Estonian socio-cultural environment. Their words seem to be used to defend against an external criticism. This may be closely linked to the tension produced when internalizing new representations that replace old conceptions about what it means to be a psychologist in Estonia. What do these “misconceptions” indicate? What values are associated to both psychology and psychological professional activity in Estonia? This variable, which must be taken into account for the affective-cognitive aspects it embodies, is not valued in the analysis.

The students’ narratives are only considered as verification of the fact that the internalization of their representations of the new institutional environment has actually occurred. Nevertheless, we think the interpretation of transformation of students’ representations should be analyzed in its full complexity in then future.

Furthermore, we ask ourselves: What type of benefit does that internalization entail for identity? We notice that the internalization of certain representations and institutional codes may be necessary for students to assert their new professional identity, which is in their very beginning. In this respect, their lack of security for not being psychologists but having to behave as such, may imply the need to quickly adopt uncritically certain institutional discourses and narratives. The fact that they have had a short experience as psychology students may determine less critical content in their narratives in relation to university curricula.

For example, a paper by (Rosa, Blanco and Huertas, 1994) arrives at different conclusions from those reached by Kullasepp. Their study describes research that aimed at assessing if after taking a course on history of psychology, students’ attitudes towards psychology changed, and also if those attitudes were reflected on the professional path they were taking

for their future. They were second year students at Universidad Autonoma de Madrid. Research concludes that after taking the course on history of psychology students did not change their basic representations about psychology. The influence of previous narratives was still important and they were reluctant to change. It is worth to take into account that they were second year students, which may imply that they made a more critical generalization of curricular influences.

All the same, a certain influence of the curricula in the transformation of students' representations cannot be denied after one year of academic study. As shown in Kullasepp's paper, it is an essential source of information for them, and in this case students can clearly define what it is and what it is not "to be a Psychologist". However, the explanation of that transformation cannot only be accounted in terms of the influence of the curricula. As clearly stated in the theoretical framework developed by Kullasepp, it should be taken into account which other voices from the socio-cultural environment enter into dialogue with that new construction of identity. To start being a psychologist implies that students consider themselves as part of a new collective group. What representations are "appropriate" to belong to the group of "Estonian psychologists"? How does the student benefit, from an identity point of view, once he has assumed the institutional representations about what it is to be an Estonian psychologist? What other voices is this group entering in dialogue with? Which conceptions or misconceptions is he discussing with? We suggest these aspects for later analysis, bearing in mind that this paper is an approach that will require further research.

The paper shows that the construction of professional identity is conceived as a relationship with a polyphony of voices and the interaction of individuals with their socio-cultural environment. This means that the construction of an identity is not a decontextualized element of a specific cultural framework. There would not be only one way of being a psychologist, but multiple ways according to the socio-cultural background under research. We believe this fundamental aspect has not been sufficiently valued when analysing data collected at the interviews. We notice certain contradictions between the theoretical framework and the conclusions of the study.

Despite discussing a co-constructed notion of professional identity, it is taken for granted that there is a predetermined way of being a psychologist and that the psychologist's professional identity is universal in nature. To this respect, it might be interesting to ask questions as the following. What does it mean to be a psychologist in a country like Estonia? Even if the paper calls for renewed emphasis on the influence of expectations and representations of others, it does not provide us with a detailed reference of those expectations and evaluations. To be a psychologist for sure depends very much on the demands and features of a specific cultural ambiance. For example, we understand that it is not the same to be a psychologist in Spain, Argentina or Estonia. In each given socio-cultural context psychology, as both a specific human science and a particular helping profession is related to certain individual and social representations, which may be rather different in each place. Therefore, these expected differences must be considered when analysing representations of professional identity.

Moreover, in each context, people's representations of their internal world are different. The following example may clarify this. In Spain it is very difficult to find people, even psychologists, who openly talk about their problems related to their internal world and private affairs with their friends. Those who are undergoing psychological counseling or treatment will not mention this in public, since it is usually considered as something negative or problematic. On the contrary, in Argentina, one of the most "psychoanalyzed" cities in the world, not talking about the internal world and personal problems with friends or relatives is not well regarded. Undergoing psychological counseling or treatment is absolutely normal and nobody conceals this fact. What is more, in certain circumstances it can be a positive attribute, as this person is considered as somebody who adopts a reflective attitude towards life in general. In this respect, it would be very interesting to know what specific attitudes can be found among estonian population in relation to these and some other similar issues, which no doubt are very relevant in relation to psychology as a future professional identity.

On the other hand, the paper does not provide any significant information about what psychological main approaches are predominant nowadays in Estonia. What disciplinary approach is more common in both the universities and the professional ambiances?

(experimental cognitive, socio-cultural, eclectic) and how this may affect students. As it is very well known, psychology, as a science and cultural production, is highly influenced by the overall cultural background. Therefore, we think that the paper presented by Kullasepp may further analyze this possible influence, which will provide us with an insight into the role of psychology within Estonian society.

Following this line of thought, while reading the paper we wondered what was the relationship between the professional practice of psychology and the political changes occurred in the last few years, mainly after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Certainly, this transformation has been decisive in the conformation of a new socio-cultural context (Ahonen, 1992). We understand that this has not been the object of research in this present study, but we think this fact should be borne in mind in further development of this study. Basically, it would be necessary to do research on how the field of psychology and its academic development has been affected by overall cultural changes produced after the independence of Estonia. It would also be interesting to have a proper understanding of present day academic perspectives of the University of Estonia; and whether the weight of the curricula is placed on either practical or theoretical aspects.

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