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Professional identity threats in interprofessional collaborations: A case of architects in professional service firms

Sumati Ahuja
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Increased use of multidisciplinary teams to carry out tasks that were previously seen as the domain of one profession has brought the manner in which professions collaborate to the fore of management interests. Drawing on 49 in-depth interviews with senior architects in four multidisciplinary professional service firms (PSFs), this article contributes to better understandings of identity threats in interprofessional collaborations. My findings bring to the fore two threats to architects' identity relating to fragmentation of work and competing professional values. I show how architects manage these threats through the simultaneous use of two responses: *highlighting identity distinctions* and *modifying identity and practices*. However, despite these strategies to defend against identity threats, respondents presented themselves as under-recognized and often under-compensated. These findings suggest that the strength of professional identity may not merely mediate threats to professionals' identity but also be constraining by locking professionals in a kind of futile resistance and disrupting identity transformation. Further, responses to professional identity threats may result in a persistent identity struggle that renders professionals vulnerable to deep insecurities regarding their worth in interprofessional collaborations. The article contributes to recent debates on the unintended consequences of interprofessional collaborations thus highlighting the challenges of finding better ways to work together.

Keywords: Architects; professional identity; interprofessional collaborations; identity threats.

Introduction

Archetypal professionals such as doctors, lawyers and architects develop a strong professional identity during long periods of education, training and socialization (Currie et al., 2010; Pratt et al., 2006). As such, professional identity is a crucial cognitive mechanism that affects workers' attitudes, behaviours, performance, status and self-esteem in the workplace and beyond (Caza & Creary, 2016; Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019). Interprofessional collaborations, however, call for the assimilation of new identities, competencies and skills relating to collaborations such as mutual knowledge and goal alignment (Caldwell et al., 2017), yet change is slow (Hoffman & Henn, 2008; Marshall, 2003). This is because many organizational actors remain embedded in traditional identities, leadership models and decision-making roles (Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008; Kent & Becerik-Gerber, 2010). In sum, in a climate where interprofessional collaborations are becoming de rigueur, professional workers may struggle with new ways of 'being and doing' at work (Iedema & Scheeres, 2003, p. 318). A better understanding of the role of professional identity in interprofessional collaborations is thus timely and consequential because it is 'unrealistic to think that simply bringing professionals in teams will lead to collaboration' (D'Amour et al., 2005, p. 126).

Scholars of work and occupations have demonstrated that occupation-specific identities make it difficult for members of different occupations to understand and appreciate each other's work (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008). Interprofessional collaborations may therefore be perceived as a threat to professionals' identity because they involve multiple parties with differing identities,

interests, beliefs and routines that ‘often make it challenging for members of an occupation group to share knowledge with non-members’ (Beech & Huxham, 2003; Currie et al., 2009; DiBenigno & Kellogg, 2014, p. 376; McNeil et al., 2013; Ybema et al., 2012). Specifically, interprofessional collaborations may be construed as a threat to professionals’ identity in two ways. First, professional identities are threatened ‘when there is a perceived risk of marginalisation or devaluation of the professional’s role or expertise’ (Armstrong, 2002; McNeil et al., 2013, p. 293) that diminishes the professionals’ social position by obscuring knowledge distinctiveness (Oborn & Dawson, 2010). Second, differences between professional values leading to contrary approaches to dealing with complex problems are also seen to trigger professional identity threats (Fiol et al., 2009; McNeil et al., 2013). Notably, a threatened professional identity can ‘constrain action as individuals and teams lose important anchors about themselves’ such as ‘who are we?’ and ‘what do we do?’ (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 563) making it difficult to collaborate.

Despite these difficulties, scholars have argued that collaborations can be successful when different occupational groups co-construct contributions in their daily work across differences in expertise (Oborn & Dawson, 2010) and transform their identities by constructing a shared, collective identity (Maguire et al., 2001) such as an interprofessional superordinate team identity (Fiol et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2011). While a superordinate identity is seen to create cohesion across professional divides (Cain et al., 2018), what these studies have not explained well is how identity threats may prevent the maintenance of a strong professional identity in collaborative contexts and the consequences for the professionals’ sense of self. This is an important omission because a subset of research, largely drawn from healthcare, suggests that when professionals perceive threats to their identities (Mitchell et al., 2011) it affects almost every aspect of

‘productive collaborative practice’ (Beech & Huxham, 2003, p. 28). A threatened professional identity, for instance, may lead to professionals withholding information from others, generating conflicts that impair collaborations by disrupting the exchange and integration of information (McNeil et al., 2013). Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *how do professionals manage their identities in the face of threats triggered by interprofessional collaborations and what are the consequences for the professionals’ sense of self?*

To address this question, I draw upon 49 in-depth interviews with senior architects to inductively explore the implications of collaborations on architects’ identity. Architects working in PSFs represent a suitable empirical setting for this research because it is a context in which professionals’ work is multidisciplinary and cooperative (Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019). In addition, the construction industry has become highly specialized, leading to further fragmentation between design and construction professionals (Cuff, 1992; Tombesi, 2010). This study highlights two threats to architects’ identity: fragmentation of work and competing professional values that emanate from the interdependent nature of their work and demonstrates how architects manage these threats through: *highlighting identity distinctions* and *modifying identity and practices*. Yet, respondents presented themselves as under-recognized and often under-compensated.

The findings reveal that despite the responses that practitioners employed to make sense of the work that they were doing, professional identity threats remained unresolved. This suggests that a strong professional identity may also be constraining, locking professionals in a kind of futile resistance that disrupts identity transformation. Furthermore, threat responses may also result in persistent identity struggles rendering professionals vulnerable to deep insecurities (Knights &

Clarke, 2014) about their worth in collaborations. In so doing, this article contributes to recent debates on the unintended consequences of emphasizing interprofessional collaborations (Currie et al., 2010; Huq et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2009; McNeil et al., 2013), thus highlighting the challenges of finding better ways to work together.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. I briefly review the literature on professional identity threats focusing on interprofessional collaborations. This is followed by an account of the research context and methods of data collection and analysis. I conclude by discussing the findings and their implications for future research and theory development.

Professional identity threats in interprofessional collaborations

Professions have long provided an important empirical context for examining identity construction because, as DiBenigno (2017, p. 4) explains, ‘[p]rofessional groups are unique in that their identities – the beliefs, values, and definitions of who they are ... is deeply entwined with what they do’. Professional identity addresses the question ‘who am I as a professional?’. The way professionals view their identity is ‘central in how they interpret and act in work situations’ (Chreim et al., 2007, p. 1515), making it a focus of a significant stream of management and organization studies research (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Caza & Creary, 2016; Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt et al., 2006; Vough, 2012).

Interprofessional collaborations bring together disparate professionals with different identities. Morgan et al. (2015, p. 1218) define interprofessional collaborations as an ‘active and ongoing partnership often between people from diverse backgrounds with distinctive professional cultures [and identities] and possibly representing different organizations or sectors, who work together

to solve problems or provide services'. Empirical research, however, paints a different picture. In complex collaborative contexts, professional identity is often at the heart of irresolvable conflicts that are protracted and resist resolution (Fiol et al., 2009). Contact with other professionals is seen to make professional identity more salient as workers negotiate work duties through their respective professional identities promoting assumptions about their professional roles and jurisdictional boundaries (Abbott, 1988; Cain et al., 2018; Farchi et al., 2022). For example, professionals enter collaborations with predispositions about their own strong identity and assumptions about the identities of others such as 'lay' or 'untrained', crystalizing the distinctions between 'professional' and 'lay' identities (Beech & Huxham, 2003).

Extant literature suggests that the strength of professional identity enables actors who have a strong professional identity to retain more control over the processes and outputs of their work than those with a weak professional identity, in collaborations (Bucher et al., 2016; Hendrikx, 2021; Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Reay et al., 2017). For example, Oborn and Dawson (2010, p. 1847) found that in interprofessional cancer team meetings (comprising of surgeons, radiotherapists, oncologists, pathologist, nurses and radiologists) there was an implicit hierarchy between medical specialists that remained unchanged despite the policy emphasising multidisciplinary collaboration. Surgeons typically led the meetings and used dramatic visualizations (e.g., 'I have to carve them up') to portray their strong identity while minimising the work of others. Surgeons thus strengthened their identity in interprofessional collaborations based on their ability to lead in negotiating and by speaking on behalf of the others in the team. As professional work becomes increasingly interdependent, however, disagreement on where to draw the jurisdictional boundaries creates a threat to professionals' identity sometimes with

unintended effects like hardening professional boundaries making it more difficult to work together (Fiol et al., 2009).

Typically, professionals are seen to successfully defend their strong identity and enhance their self-views in multidisciplinary teams by convincing and influencing others' thinking (Bucher et al., 2016), highlighting identity distinctions (Currie et al., 2012) or actively advocating their skills rather than 'exchanging information neutrally' (Oborn & Dawson, 2010, p. 1850) thus reproducing the very occupational divisions that interprofessional teams are designed to ameliorate (Finn et al., 2010). In this way, a key component of maintaining a strong identity in interprofessional collaborations is based on negating or devaluing the collaboration and/or the other groups identity and thus viewed as a defensive response to identity threat.

Another way in which professionals successfully maintain their strong identity and enhance their positional power (Bucher et al., 2016) is by transforming their identity to meet the needs of the collaboration. Doctors, for instance, transform their professional identities in multidisciplinary collaborations as 'leaders', 'head of team' or 'strong professionals who collaborate with others to provide high quality patient care' (Currie et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2017, p. 1064) thus enhancing their self-views. Given the complex role of professional identity in interprofessional collaborations, scholarship must also look to understand when and how strong professional identities can be threatened during instances of interprofessional collaborations. Here, micro-level studies are important because they ground assertions about maintaining a strong professional identity in the face of identity threats triggered by interprofessional collaborations.

In highly professionalized contexts such as healthcare, interdependent ways of working are perceived as a threat to the very essence of who professionals believe themselves to be (Currie et

al., 2010). Threats to professionals' self-definition are both salient and emotional (Ahuja et al., 2019; Fiol et al., 2009; Huq et al., 2017) and professionals retaliate with potential consequences for successful collaborations. This is because, when a professionals' identity is threatened they may resist applying their knowledge in new ways or reject the changing authority structures in project teams in an effort to maintain as much professional power as possible (Truelove & Kellogg, 2016, p. 665). For example, a GP who was invited to represent other GPs in a collaborative group prioritized his professional identity over that of the collaborative group by refusing to turn off his mobile phone during meetings thus placing his own needs above that of the collaboration (Beech & Huxham, 2003). Research suggests that such defensive responses to identity threats influence interprofessional interactions in detrimental ways such as generating negative emotions (Huq et al., 2017), increased turnover and reduced performance (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Kourti, 2017) that hampers collaborations (van Os et al., 2015). These studies, however, have largely overlooked the struggles of maintaining a strong professional identity in the face of identity threats and the consequences for the professionals' sense of self.

Professionals seek to resolve identity threats in attempts to minimize damage to their strong identities (Brown et al., 2010; McGivern et al., 2015; Pratt et al., 2006; Schilling et al., 2012; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). The resolution of threats enables professionals to 'affirm' their identities by constructing a positive (van Os et al., 2015) and/or desired professional identity (Brown & Coupland, 2015). However, an emerging stream of research suggest that emotional attachment to a strong professional identity can lead to acute anxiety 'about meeting the challenging expectations necessary to sustain their [professionals'] sense of self' (Gill, 2015, p. 320). Importantly, concerns about being devalued may 'trigger different emotional outcomes ranging from anxiety to guilt' that disrupt ongoing identity processes such as identity

transformation (Gill, 2015, p. 309) with broader implications for managing interprofessional collaborations.

Collaborative construction project arrangements call for joint decision-making, shared risk and reward. A widespread assumption is that multi-party contractual agreements are characterized by consensus, co-operation and interdependency where individual interests and identities are subsumed into fostering collaboration and integration of the project team for the benefit of the project (Lahdenperä, 2012). However, this view seems inherently unlikely because the construction industry- like healthcare, is increasingly characterized by a fragmented, specialized division of labour where each profession has a distinct role and identity (Finn et al., 2010).

Whereas previous literature establishes that the strength of professional identity mediates identity threats and professionals successfully maintain their positional power by enhancing their self-views in interprofessional collaborations, we know little about how identity threats and related responses impact the maintenance of a strong professional identity and the consequences for the professionals' sense of self. Against this backdrop and drawing on an extensive empirical study of architects working in PSFs, this article explores identity threats, the threat responses, and the implications for professionals' sense of self.

Methods

Research context

Architects have long enjoyed exclusive claims to design expertise (Blau, 1987), underpinning architects' identity as the dominant actor on design matters (Cohen et al., 2005). As buildings and projects become more complex however, different professionals take control of an

increasingly fragmented and specialized division of labor while collaborating with other members to achieve a common goal (Finn et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2009; van Os et al., 2015). For example, project teams typically include several architects (design, project, executive, interior and landscape), engineers (e.g., plumbing, electrical, or heating, ventilation and air conditioning), energy consultants, contractors, subcontractors, product manufacturers, fabricators (windows, doors, lifts, handrails, etc.), code inspectors, government officials (local, state), a plethora of managers (construction, project, client) and more (Hoffman & Henn, 2008). Although, multidisciplinary in professional services is not new, the evolving structures of large-scale projects have created more interdependencies among professionals (Akintoye & Main, 2007; Tombesi, 2010). Moreover, recent contractual and technical developments have disrupted previously established demarcations, and architects' identity is increasingly in flux and under negotiation (Ahuja et al., 2017; Bos-De Vos et al., 2019).

Traditionally, design, construction and management have been separated at both a professional and legal level, eschewing any responsibility of one professional group for the others. Increasingly, architects collaborate on construction projects 'where risk and reward are shared and stakeholder success is dependent on project success' (Ashcraft, 2010; Lahdenperä, 2012, p. 58). Under these contracts, the project team works collaboratively to design and construct the project to the agreed target cost and schedule. Although integrated project delivery, project alliancing and BIM provide a collaborative framework that enables the flow of information from scheduling and logistics to how the project will be constructed, 'shifting the focus from individual processes to project workflows and seamless interactions' (Ashcraft, 2010, p. 147), these transformations also require 'profound changes in belief and behavior' (Ashcraft, 2010, p. 152), with implications for maintaining a strong professional identity.

In this article, I report on in-depth interview data collected from a larger ethnographic study of four multidisciplinary PSFs, conducted over an 18-month period between July 2015 and December 2016. The firms are situated in Sydney, Australia, and are engaged in a range of market sectors. These firms have offices in several worldwide locations and are involved in large-scale urban renewal projects. Each firm employs around 500 to 900 staff worldwide and is wholly owned and led by 25–32 directors or principals. One firm is a relative newcomer to the market; the other three firms have been established for over 50 years and have won numerous national and international architecture awards. In particular, these firms are considered prestigious workplaces, and understandings of architecture as a creative venture underpin the prestige of these firms. Two of the respondents are renowned architects who have won several awards and hold esteemed positions in professional associations and educational institutions.

Data collection

Observations conducted at meetings with consultants, designers and management were interwoven with face-to-face open-ended interviews to investigate the various working practices and understand better the meaning that architects ascribed to emergent and established actions as well as to their professional identity (Kourti, 2017). While most of these conversations took place in the open-plan offices where the respondents worked, on the few occasions informal conversations were arranged outside the office (e.g., en route to site visits or meetings). Interviews also offered in-depth information on specific cases (Silverman, 2014) and architects' experiences of interprofessional collaborations. When asked to 'explain how they see themselves' (Reay et al., 2017, p. 1045) in collaborative contexts architects responded with statements about the work that they do. In total, 49 in-depth interviews were conducted across the four firms (see Table 1; names

of the firms have been anonymized). However, because participants tend ‘to orient to the research interview by [...] giving the interviewer what they want to hear’ (Speer, 2005, p. 194), the interviews were conceived as open-ended ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1988). I asked participants a range of general identity-themed questions about themselves, their firm and their profession, such as ‘what does it mean to you to be an architect?’, ‘what is important to you in your work?’ and ‘how do you view the role of the architect compared to others in project teams?’. Interviewees enthusiastically discussed the projects they were working on, their experience of work in project teams and the relationships and interactions in project teams. Nevertheless, I was aware that, in the interview situation, meanings were being actively assembled through ‘processes of impression management’ (Brown & Coupland, 2015, p. 1320). Prior research has pointed out that the identities of interviewees are discursive accomplishments, co-constructed with the researcher in an interview setting (Knights & Clarke, 2014), suggesting that ‘interviews represent a conversational construction’ (Brown et al., 2014, p. 388). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. On average, each interview transcript was 7000–9000 words long. The observations helped to further clarify the context of the interviews and together these methods allowed me to understand how architects experience collaborative work.

Although the focus is on senior members, resulting in the omission of other voices such as junior architects or other architecture, engineering and construction (AEC) team members, I argue that the reflections of powerful actors are valuable because ‘[e]xperience, maturity, professional legitimacy, and control over material resources may provide senior professionals with greater agency for reframing and re-enacting professional roles within wider institutional constraints’ (McGivern et al., 2015, p. 414). Moreover, senior members are under-represented in the literature on professions (Korica & Molloy, 2010), and focusing on later-career professionals

enables an emphasis on ‘a significant change in a role that a professional has enacted over time and has considered self-defining’ (Chreim et al., 2007, p. 1516). Table 2 shows the years of professional experience of the architects, whose accounts I report on.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Data analysis

My analysis is centred on identifying key interpretive schemes or patterns characterizing identity threats and responses in the face of interprofessional collaborations (Gendron & Spira, 2010). I followed a systematic, inductive approach to data analysis, moving back and forth between data and theory and focusing on instances of identity threats as architects sought to (re)construct their identity through talk (Brown, 2015; Brown & Coupland, 2015). I analyzed the data in three notional stages (See Figure 1). The first stage of coding captured open codes directly from participants’ words (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This first round of coding highlighted one key theme across all interviewees: that the increasingly interdependent nature of architects’ work generated significant threats to architects’ identity. I also noted that interviewees used similar words and metaphors to talk about their work and relations with other members of the AEC team. I followed an interpretive approach to analysing discursive data (Heracleous, 2004) in moving from first order codes to second order codes (e.g. van Maanen, 1979), as I ‘sought to discern patterns relating to multiple themes that were consistent across interviewees’ (Kyratsis et al., 2017, p. 18).

In the next stage, I reviewed the context in which the identity threats were experienced. As I went back to the notes from my observations, I became aware that specific interactional situations were perceived as an identity threat because other members of the AEC team made changes to the design. I focus on these threats and responses because they featured prominently in the interview transcripts. I then reviewed the literature on professional identity threats in interprofessional collaborations to reflect on my overall findings (Reay & Hinings, 2009), develop themes and advance insights into the strategies (i.e. identity threat responses) that practitioners employed to make sense of the work that they were doing and defend against identity threats. Some participants employed more than one strategy in making sense of their work. In other words, the strategies presented here, and their use were not mutually exclusive (i.e., either or both strategies could be simultaneously adopted within the same participant's talk). In the following section, I present the key findings emerging from the data that provide an in-depth account of how collaborative project structures threaten the architects' professional identity as they struggle 'to be able to give an account that makes sense of [their] work in this broader context' (Muirhead, 2004, p. 8). I then synthesized in a 'descriptive yet comprehensive fashion the experiences that participants discussed' (Petriglieri et al., 2018, p. 7). The common themes that emerged from respondents' accounts included (1) the identity threats respondents experienced in relation to the interdependent nature of their work, and (2) how they responded to these threats and the impact on their self-views. After further analysis, I aggregated these descriptions into two responses to identity threats: *highlighting identity distinctions* and *modifying identity and practices*.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Findings

In this section, I show how the interdependent nature of their work threatened architect's identity. I consider two specific threats to professional identity: fragmentation of work and competing professional values (understood as ideological components of purpose). My analysis brings to the fore two strategies – *highlighting identity distinctions* and *modifying identity and practices*– that were employed opportunistically to mediate these threats. However, the simultaneous enactment of these strategies not only demonstrates how architects cope with threats to their professional identity but also highlights the frustrations and anxieties over the diminution of their role and their feelings of powerlessness which were surprisingly, incongruous with their strong identity.

Threats to professional identity

Fragmentation of work: Architectural services are increasingly fragmented in large-scale construction projects and many respondents struggled to maintain historically established roles and, relatedly, preserve a favourable image of their professional self (Ybema et al., 2012).

What we do is under threat ... and like I said it's getting chopped up further and further and the boundaries of what an architect does is blurring more and more (Max, senior associate).

The fragmentation of architectural work was experienced as threatening to their identity because it diminished the role of architects' who are no longer leading the design process (Deamer, 2011; Gauchet, 2009). Different architects are engaged to do different portions of the design work (e.g., concept, production, façade, interiors, landscape). Moreover, subcontractors typically provide

designs for the portion work they are contracted to do (e.g., windows, doors, lifts, facade, handrails etc.), thus marginalizing architects' role in the design process:

we don't get enough credit [for what we do] ...everyone [on the project team] *thinks* they are the most important person in the room...but [design] it's not their specialty...they are only looking at their little piece of the puzzle I'm looking at the tiny details and the big picture...people just don't get it (Seth, project architect).

For many architects, teams of 300-400 consultants engaged on one project was experienced as a threat to their identity because their expertise was undervalued: 'when you're talking about food chain, I think designs at the bottom' (Sara, project architect). Further, increasing specialization has meant that contractual relationships can change during a project, generating challenges for architects to claim an exclusive identity for themselves. For example, this firm was initially engaged for the concept design phase in which the contractor was part of the bid/tendering team. The team won the bid, but due to the nature of the design-construct contract the contractual relationships changed:

now we've all been novated to a builder for the construction phase and now there's this weird thing where honestly, we don't know who works for who at the moment it's ... it's crazy the worst most convoluted one I've ever seen. ... I can't tell you this scenario it makes my head hurt (Bob, director).

In these accounts' architects expressed frustrations and anxieties over the diminution of their role which was incongruous with their strong sense of identity.

Competing professional values: Typically, architects were concerned that design priorities are not heeded by others in the project team because speed and cost concerns tended to dominate:

just finding a seat at the table [where design decisions are made] ... can be a shit fight (Jon, architect).

Architects expressed anxieties around their expertise being constantly challenged by other project actors. For example, for this project manager, keeping to the timeline is paramount:

The way I run my projects ... basically, we've got to chase the architects up to get the project [delivered on time]. And my approach is I go with them down on site and I'll say, "what's the problem?" and I try and work with them to get the design out quicker [JV, project manager].

For the architect, however, the project manager's priority was a source of tension:

The tension or the difficulty is just speed ... the speed at which [project manager] want things resolved ... it's not really possible to resolve design well ... that quickly (Sam, director).

Architectural designs are typically heavily modified when initial estimates from various subcontracted trade 'packages' are received and sometimes completely overthrown to meet the projects' commercial imperatives as part of what's known as 'value engineering'. This participant's response exemplifies the [anxieties associated with the] struggle to accept changes to design initiated by other actors:

I know it [design] can just drift ... [so] you have to push really hard to get to the people making the decisions ... you've got to play that game really or you just get walked all over ... it's a battle it's exhausting ... some days I just don't can't deal with any of it! (Xun, director).

What I learnt from observations, and from follow-up interviews with many of the professionals, was that although they believed interprofessional collaborations resulted in better project outcomes, a number of architects felt frustrated, anxious, discouraged and even angry about team decisions which reduced the quality of the architectural service in favour of efficiency concerns:

but most frustrating of all is that you can spend a day as a talented architect working here at [firm name] ... but our reputation and our fate is tethered to this [project] group and erhh and there's so many scenarios where ... it's very hard to defend it [architects' identity] ... [for example] they're [project manager] saying [to the client]

we aren't providing the information in a timely enough fashion its awful (Jack, project architect).

For this respondent, the collaboration is an identity threat because decisions made by others impact the design making it difficult to safeguard and defend his position as a competent architect. In summary, architects experienced the fragmentation of their work and competing professional values as identity threats and responded in two ways by: *highlighting identity distinctions* and *modifying their identity and practices*.

Highlighting identity distinctions

When architects were confronted with marginalized roles in the project teams that threatened their strong identity, they highlighted identity distinctions. In these accounts respondents affirmed their identity as the authoritative expert in relation to other professionals in the team (consultants, engineers etc). I see this as both an immersive and exclusionary strategy that bolstered their professional identity while marginalizing the work of others. Specifically, participants highlighted identity distinctions in three ways. First, respondents characterized themselves as 'public advocates' – that is, moral agents 'doing good' (Wright et al., 2012) for the future of the built environment:

we [architects] have a privileged position in that we purely serve the public interest and can speak on its behalf in a much more believable way [than others in the project team] (Xing, director).

In these accounts respondents appeared to gain a great deal of satisfaction from the higher purpose of their work.

Another way in which respondents differentiated from others in the project team was by emphasizing their self-views as ‘champions’:

managing information and decisions in that kind of environment is at times near impossible and it [project success] really, I think, relies on the success of individuals ... champions [architects] to drive particular [design] items (Jose, senior associate).

Although these accounts capture a professional identity that differentiates architects from other project actors, the emphasis is on the individual ‘champion’ architect driving the success of the team. Yet, respondents felt marginalized because even champions had to implore others for what they thought was important:

You need that champion [architect] who kind of digs their heels in ... whatever the relationship is ... to kind of plead for what is important [in the design] (Mel, associate).

What is striking is that, in contrast to the collective sense of ‘we-ness’ which reflects a collective attitude and dedication to the collaboration (e.g. Zhang & Huxham, 2009), these accounts highlight the distinctions setting architects apart from others in the project team. For example:

we [architect] are the only ones [in the project team] who can graphically represent the whole picture (Sam, director).

Notably, a professional identity that emphasizes differences in collaborative contexts also carries the burden of choosing to stand outside the collaboration (Wright et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, these distinctions were not only between architects and engineers/project managers who have divergent identities (e.g., creative vs. technical) and professional values but also included other architects who undertook the more mundane work such as, preparing construction drawings that are highly resource demanding. The data indicated participants insecurities concerning their strong identity being diluted by ‘managing’ the work of other architects:

we're supposed to be able to you know reduce the number of people we allocate to the project and we're just [supposed to be] reviewing their [executive architects] work ensuring that the design intent has been recorded. The reality is that it's [design work] not reduced it's still here ... and really great people [talented architects in our office] are managing the people in [offshore location] because the management framework doesn't work on its own err and the frustration is constant (Ali, senior associate).

In this instance, mundane work is hived off but generates another identity threat as the 'talented architect' with a strong sense of self is merely managing the work of others. Generally, management tasks were viewed negatively and a further marginalization of architects' roles which left many with a sense of unease about their identity (i.e., constant frustrations of doing work that is not aligned with their identity) making it challenging to collaborate.

The third way in which participants highlighted identity distinctions was by positioning themselves as the profession best equipped to provide design leadership, as shown during observations of a concept design meeting in which the engineers were largely silent while the architect explained the design concept:

It's an engineering led project so where the tunnels go, the alignments, traffic flows ... we decide that so that's all [engineering]. They're [architect] doing the streetscape, the stations, public space interface and all that (Andy, engineer).

By contrast, architects claimed that they were in fact leading the project, as this respondent explains:

They [engineers] have all the numbers [data on traffic flows, pedestrians' numbers, access points, etc.] but they'll wait for us to put the design on the table before they say, 'Oh you can't do that'. So really, it's us [architects] leading, doing the work first and then they'll [engineers] jump in (Max, senior associate).

In these accounts, architects have no doubts that their professional identity is incontestable and that there is an exclusionary boundary that cannot be questioned (Bucher et al., 2016). For example:

no one has the overall *vision*...they're [consultants] good at the technical details but less effective when it comes to the *big picture*... that's us [architects]... that can only be us (Joe, senior associate).

In this way, there was a persistent struggle to affirm architects' identity in relation to other professionals.

To summarize, one way in which architects responded to identity threats in collaboration was by highlighting identity distinctions. They did so by characterizing themselves as advocates, champions, and design leaders. However, the identity struggles (e.g., fear of losing control) appeared to remain unresolved.

Modifying identity and practices

The second response to identity threats refers to instances where architects modified their identity and practices as team players focused on delivering the best designs *collectively*.

Although architects feared that the overall success of the project was at stake because of the amount of design work being done by non-designers (e.g., design-build contractors), architects acknowledged that this is not a 'passing phase', thus they had to modify and adjust their identity and practices. In these accounts, respondents attempted to make sense of working with people who have different roles and professional backgrounds, by adapting to changes associated with performing team-based 'non-architectural tasks'. I identified three different ways in which architects modified their identity and practices.

First, respondents presented teamwork as strongly aligned with their identity by emphasizing that architects shared design responsibilities with others as the following two respondents articulate:

It's not like ... I'm saying this so do this ... I try to frame it that we've come at the best [design] option for the ... project (Annie, senior associate).

I think the onus is on us to be in contact regularly with those people and to say 'has anything changed?' ... this is what we're drawing, this is what we're writing, this is what we're doing (Vishal, architect).

In these accounts, respondents aligned their professional identity with the project team but also argued that they could use their professional identity to enrich the team and deliver the best outcome for 'the project'.

I think what we do [on large projects] is far less about design than you probably imagine and it's actually much more weighted towards the coordination and the [construction] documentation as opposed to the design component. Of course, that is a key component up front, but the reality is that on these 10-year projects, [design] that's 2 years out of the 10 years (Helen, project architect).

Here, professional identity was modified through emphasizing altered practices from drawing to managing and coordinating design inputs between various consultants, as these architects explained:

Our [project] architect role typically ... is about managing people, so it's not drawing, its managing people, managing information (Cam, project architect).

The pressure on architects to constantly be monitoring and checking the work of others (in the project teams) was both, stressful yet essential to who they claimed and aspired to be as architects.

Another way to accommodate collaborations was by emphasizing architects' professional identity as 'negotiators', facilitating the overall performance of the project team. The ability to lead in negotiating was perceived as a means of affirming their identity in collaborative contexts:

We're essentially the middle ground. So, we almost have to ... I mean, I think as an architect – you always have to be a bit of a negotiator or ... you have to be the voice between the – the voice of reason – but I feel like we play that much more pivotal role now in terms of engaging and communicating effectively with each of those parties (Mel, associate).

Several respondents described the changes to their practices on 'large projects' and reframed their professional identity to meet the changing needs of collaborations:

I think ...our role as architect has changed because we're almost like the meeting agent between each of the...[consultants] and the project manager. But I often feel like we are ones that everyone goes to for help (Mike, project architect).

However, competing priorities undermined architects' identity. In attempts to overcome these anxieties, respondents modified their practices as crucial in enabling the work of others:

in that respect we did so much [work]; there was so much to do with where we were even going to put the stations; there was so much up-front stuff before the engineers could really start grappling with some of it (Seth, project architect).

Indeed, architects derived a great deal of satisfaction through a willingness to take on more collaborative activities. For example:

my job is to make sure that the right information [from various specialists] is ... passed onto the right people at the right time ... just making sense of *all* this information ... that's stressful (Ben, project architect).

For this participant, retaining control over design inputs from different specialists was a way of maintaining a strong identity (e.g., 'maintain the design intent...so they're *actually* building what *we* designed' (Ben, project architect, emphasis in original)). However, this work of supporting others by taking on non-architectural tasks was seen as mundane generating further tensions characterized by anxiety.

In these accounts, accommodating collaborations was seen as essential for realizing their work architects. Yet, they did not take on opportunities that may have carved out of a new scope of agency because they did not align with their strong identity. For example, this developer explained:

we worked closely [with architectural firm] on the design so we have a good relationship...well when we really needed a project manager, I... We assumed they [architects] would step up to...but they did nothing (Caesar, developer).

Surprisingly, even though respondents noted that the work they were doing was more managing than designing, yet they distanced themselves from project management *per se* which was seen as mundane and not something that ‘talented architects’ did.

To summarize, architects responded to identity threats by modifying their professional identity and practices to suit the changing needs of collaborations. Although this response allowed for the dilution of their work (by emphasizing shared responsibilities of design, managing, and coordinating other actors and positioning their work as enabling the work of other project actors), yet identity threats persisted.

Unresolved identity tensions

Surprisingly, despite their strongly socialized professional identities architects felt they had nominal influence in large teams. For many respondents, constantly being challenged on their design decisions was a disconcerting experience:

you do feel like you’re getting pushed around a lot, it’s value engineering ... now this ... it just costs too much, and you have to sort of choose and pick where you want to fight. Because it does feel like an endless fight, almost ... non-stop and it wears you down (Cam, project architect).

The anxieties architects associated with these interactions were indicated by their descriptions of ‘battles’ of having to constantly negotiate design with the collaborators. For some, the struggles over ‘being heard’ and ‘constantly pushed around’ made them feel worn out and often excluded from team decision-making as this respondent explained:

There’s a whole lot of these meetings where you have to go and speak to all these different people ... you know ... before you can *even put that design on the table* (Ben, architect, emphasis in original).

Notably, despite being in senior positions in renowned PSFs, respondents frequently invoked tensional terms such as ‘plead’ and ‘fight’ to describe the fear of ‘losing control’ over design in large projects which, made them feel powerless and under-valued as they struggled to convince and influence others.

The inability to reconcile their strong identity with their actions fuelled further anxieties about their relative powerlessness in large teams:

there is so much information coming from [specialist consultants and fabricators] ... so we [architects are] ... just chasing our tails ... my head is constantly in a spin, there’s no time to think! (Cam, project architect).

For some respondents there was a sense that their professional identity was further diluted in collaborations which led to situations where architects sometimes dissociated themselves from the team decision. In other words, despite the strong desire to affirm their identity in collaborations respondents frequently felt powerless and undervalued in multidisciplinary teams.

Although architects modified their identity and practices in ways that were shaped by the demands of the project and gained satisfaction from collaborative work as ‘team players’, constantly defending their identity left many architects feeling further marginalized as they

struggled to maintain a positive image of themselves. To counter their marginalization architects looked for bigger, more influential roles. This also meant that sometimes architects took on tasks that they were not contracted to do and did not get fully reimbursed for:

I am resolving mechanical ducts and electrical or – that really shouldn't necessarily be my problem. But because I was doing the core outline plans and I needed to issue the construction drawings, it was my problem, but I just wish that – so, the mechanical subcontractor was responsible for coordinating, I just wish that they'd take a more lead role because that is part of their contract. It's not in our scope (Vishal, architect).

The quote illustrates that while certain architects saw opportunities to demonstrate professional expertise by taking on a bigger role, they were under-compensated and thus unable to improve their marginalized position in projects.

The work of supporting others by taking on non-architectural tasks was seen as mundane generating further identity tensions. For instance, this architect struggled to maintain a positive identity in interactions because the marginalization of this role made him feel disheartened and angry:

It's so disheartening... We're working on the design for months and now they're in there [meeting with structural engineer, services engineers and project manager] slashing and burning everything we've done so I yeah I'm pretty f... ing pissed (Mal, senior associate).

Tensions and competitiveness between different professional groups at a broad level became evident in jokes about 'who's the boss?', 'bloody architects!' particularly when faced with competing professional values. For example, during a design coordination meeting, a project manager who was relatively new to the team could not agree with the acoustic engineer on several issues and eventually fired the acoustic engineer. For the architect, this resulted in a great deal of anxiety as it entailed challenging the authority of the project manager:

we've been using [acoustic engineer] for 10 years ... so now we've got a new engineer and a series of wall types that we've used on every job, but now this engineer won't accept all of those wall types. So, I've had to go through and re-engineer them which is going to add massive cost to the project, so I've accepted that ... so we've drawn them and there's a big list of emails that are all disclaimers saying this is adding complications, this is adding cost, that it's not been born by the project blah, blah, blah ... but you know we might not ever get paid for that (Kabir, project architect).

Here, the respondent accepted the project managers decision, yet the comments indicated that he felt he had nominal influence and thus was inhibited in his participation. Moreover, he had taken on extra work that was not being adequately compensated which made him feel further marginalized and unable to speak up.

To summarize, despite attempts to resolve professional identity threats by highlighting identity distinctions and modifying their identity and practices to suit the changing needs of collaborations, architects felt powerless and under-valued as they struggled to convince and influence others. Furthermore, while some respondents saw opportunities to take on a bigger role, they were under-compensated and thus unable to improve their marginalized position in project teams.

Discussion

There is ample evidence that a strong professional identity can enhance one's self-views (Chreim et al., 2007; Lammers et al., 2013; Pratt et al., 2006; Vough, 2012). Yet, given the relative frequency with which professionals have to deal with identity threats in interprofessional collaborations prior research has largely overlooked the struggles of maintaining a strong professional identity in the face of identity threats and the implications of these struggles on professionals' self-views. This study provides a more nuanced understanding of the role of

professional identity in collaborations as professionals adapt to ‘a more complex ecology of expert labour’ (Adams et al., 2020, p. 5) and new ways of working, in two areas.

The role of professional identity in interprofessional collaborations

Prior research suggests that a strong professional identity provides stability (Oborn & Dawson, 2010) and guides action especially during times of change (Cain et al., 2018). One of the key debates in the literature on interprofessional collaborations is that the strength of professional identity mitigates identity threats in interprofessional collaborations (Currie et al., 2012; Finn, 2008; Martin et al., 2009). Instead, and distinct from this existing literature, a key finding of this study is that responses aimed at mitigating, deflecting and/or defending against threats to a strong professional identity (Brown & Coupland, 2015) may in fact, stymie identity change in collaborative contexts. Accordingly, responses to protect against identity threats may be a kind of self-defeating inertia that hamper professional identity change. Consequently, the study expands present conceptualizations of the role of professional identity in interprofessional collaborations by elaborating on identity threats emanating from the fragmentation of work and competing professional values which make it difficult to maintain a positive sense of self. More specifically, this article contributes to better understandings of professional identity in collaborations by illustrating how and when potential identity misalignments emerge and become problematic.

Theorizing around the empirical observations, this study suggests that the inability to reconcile changes to a strong identity in collaborative contexts potentially marginalizes the professional further. In contrast to previous conceptualizations, this study suggests that a strong professional identity in collaborative contexts is myopic (Ashforth, 2016) locking professionals in a kind of

futile resistance and disrupting identity transformation. Furthermore, what this study highlights is that large, complex, multiorganizational projects represent a model of practice that provides less than satisfactory resources with which to forge a rich sense of professional identity.

Furthermore, this study also challenges some commonly held assumptions about professional identity. Professionals are often viewed as an undifferentiated category of workers that are ‘in control over how they enact their role, highly intrinsically motivated, consistently satisfied with their work, and resistant to outside pressures on their work’ (Hoff, 2021, p. 1396). Increasingly however, regulatory, and organizational change encourage interprofessional collaboration and the blurring of professional boundaries and identities (Cain et al., 2018; Farchi et al., 2022; Huq et al., 2017). In this milieu, understanding and explicating the experience of identity threats in different contexts is important for individuals, organizations, society and management research because the inability to cope with change can lead to vicious cycles of defensiveness (Huq et al., 2017), disillusionment (Ahuja et al., 2019), dysfunction and despair (Fleming, 2020) that may ultimately lead to defensive isolation (Marshall, 2003). The study extends these understandings by suggesting that understanding both the situational and interactional dynamics of professional identity in collaborations is important. Indeed, some professionals such as doctors, appear to have had more success in maintaining their strong identities in collaborations (Currie et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2017) than architects, thus reinforcing the view that professions are not homogenous (see also Hoff, 2021; Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; Musson & Duberley, 2007). Finally, this research also has clear implications for managing interprofessional collaborations. Specifically, the findings offer rich insights into the strategies deployed in response to professional identity threats and provide a way of better understanding behaviour in

collaborations in practice (e.g. Zhang & Huxham, 2009). Professionals, for instance, may not see how identity tensions spur vicious cycles of defensiveness and/or they may assume that vicious cycles are par for the course in interprofessional collaborations (Huq et al., 2017). In these situations, managers can encourage professionals to ‘creatively determine how best to use and synthesize professional and team identities’ (Cain et al., 2018, p. 22) by motivating professionals to appreciate divisions within the team and include diverse identities in teamwork to improve interorganizational project outcomes. Managers can also purposely plan opportunities for interactions and conversations aimed at transforming domain-specific knowledge so that it can be used toward a shared goal (e.g. Bechky, 2003). Finally, professions need to work closely together to fully realize more productive collaborations with ‘new’ occupations, which may also better prepare professions for the changes the future brings (Empson, 2021; Hoff, 2021).

Threat responses and implications for professionals’ self-views

Prior literature suggests that positive or esteem enhancing self-views enables people to reconcile identity misalignments (Fernando & Patriotta, 2020). By contrast this study offers a more fine-grained understanding of how responses to identity threats may also result in a persistent struggle. Although a threatened identity restricts actions (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and the resolution of threats is seen to secure identity claims (Musson & Duberley, 2007), identity struggles are largely seen as transitory, and ‘strugglers’ are conceptualized as en route to stronger identities (Alvesson, 2010). Indeed, prior research has overwhelmingly argued that responses to identity threats are directed toward eliminating threats and resolving identity tensions through the creation of esteem-enhancing self-definitions (Watson, 2008; Wright et al., 2012). What this perspective obscures, however, is that threat responses may not be self-affirming or lead to the

resolution of identity threats but rather, fuel further anxiety around maintaining a strong professional identity in collaborations.

A traditional, strong professional identity informed architects' identity and how they made sense of their work in collaborative contexts. Yet, they appeared stuck in a position of powerlessness and unable to seek out or generate narratives that were more favourable to their sense of self-worth (Croft et al., 2015) and in doing so, distanced themselves from work and opportunities that did not align with their professional identity. Moreover, despite attempts to (re)identify themselves in relation to the changing needs of collaborations (Kourti, 2017), constantly defending their identity left respondents feeling further marginalized and worn out as they struggled to maintain a positive image of themselves. In contrast to research that suggests that individuals separate themselves from the collective to preserve their sense of self (Kreiner et al., 2006) or create positive identities by constructing a shared, collective identity (Cain et al., 2018; Fiol et al., 2009; Maguire et al., 2001), the data demonstrates that identity threats may also result in professional identities that 'may not simply be the solution to a problem; they can be problematic in themselves or create problems of their own' (Beech et al., 2016, p. 519).

These insights help us better understand how problematic responses to threats can be, by rendering professionals vulnerable to 'deep insecurities regarding [their] worth, identity and standing' (Gabriel, 2010 cf. Knights & Clarke, 2014, p. 351) in interprofessional collaborations. These findings are theoretically important because they demonstrate that identity strategies are grounded in individuals' perceptions and how professionals experience their work uniquely, and across different situations and contexts (Barley et al., 2017; Fernando & Patriotta, 2020; Hoff, 2021).

Limitations and implications for future research

The study has limitations that offer avenues for future research. I have examined a specific professional group: architects engaged in large-scale urban redevelopment projects. On the one hand, my findings are transferable to other occupational groups engaged in multidisciplinary contexts such as film and advertising, among others. On the other hand, occupational groups working within more traditional contexts may experience different threats to their identity and respond differently. Researchers may, for instance, examine occupational change over time and find other strategies or practices for retaining a positive sense of self and how these strategies evolve. Second, comparative studies may consider a broader array of interactions among various actors in occupational networks, taking into account the threat response strategies of other professionals participating in these networks. Third, my emphasis was on the accounts of senior professionals – that is, individuals who have greater legitimacy in (re)constructing professional identity. Younger professionals may experience identity threats differently, influencing their team performance and self-esteem in varied ways.

Conclusions

Many occupations face challenges to the traditional structure of their work, which can have significant negative effects on interprofessional team performance, organizations and on society at large. Given that identities are socially constructed and thus inherently unstable, my interpretive analysis provides a portrayal of contemporary professions at a transitional moment when traditional professionals are no longer omniscient in their authoritative positions. As professionals increasingly engage with interprofessional collaborations that challenge assumptions and expectations of their professional identity within a particular work context, an openness of the different skills than historical precedents have afforded is required. The specific

challenges for professional education today are how to prepare individual professionals ‘to take a more interdisciplinary perspective towards their own profession’ (Caza & Creary, 2016, p. 29), and how to construct new professional identities that embrace teamwork. As such, my empirical study of architects dealing with identity threats and the complexities of sustaining their sense of self in collaborations has significant implications for theory and practice in increasingly inter-connected work environments.

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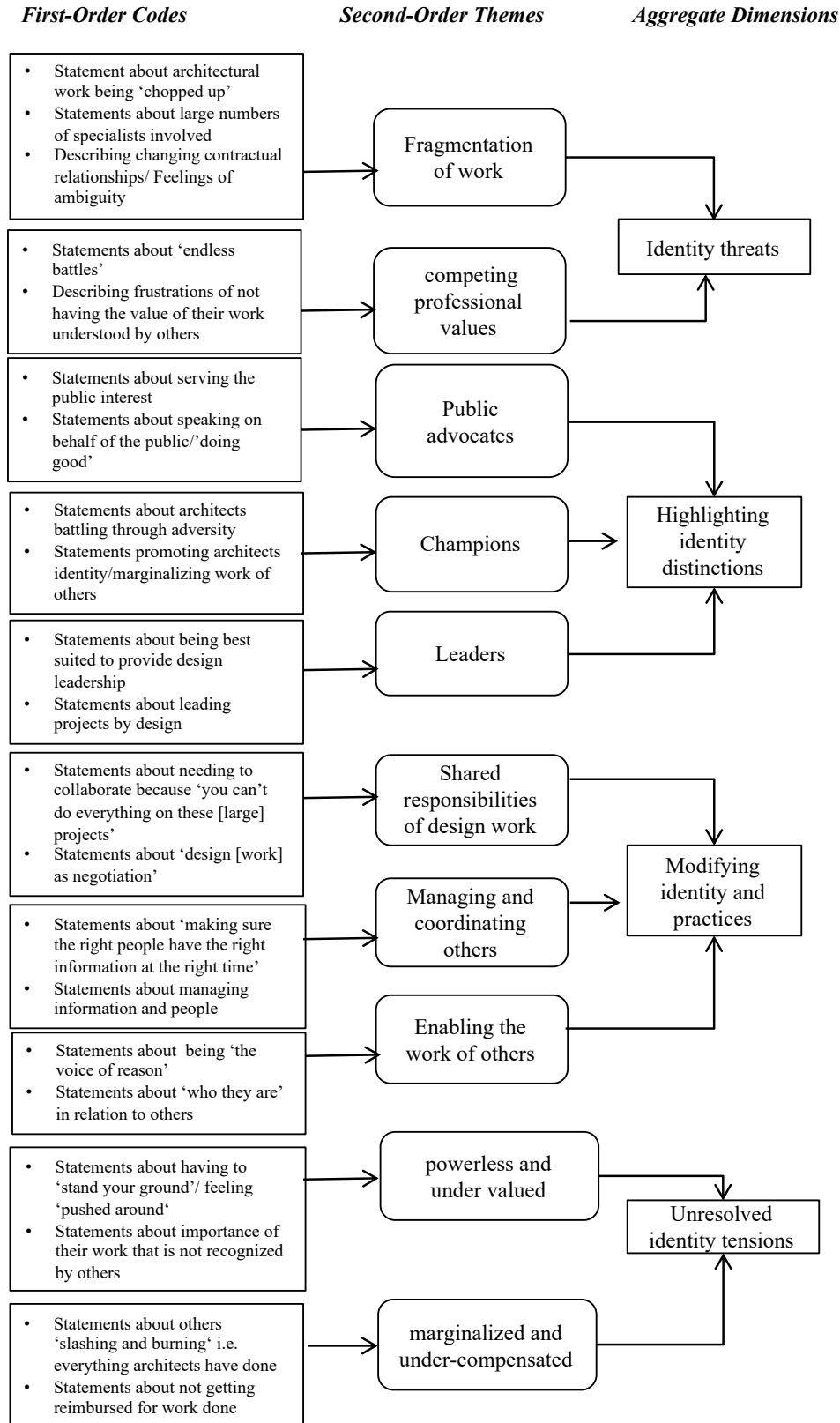
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Figure 1
Data Structure



Organization	Work undertaken	Number interviewed	Respondents
Firm 1	Transport, health, education, commercial, sports, residential, conservation, public realm	13	Directors (5), senior associates (4), project architects (3), architect (1)
Firm 2	Transport, health, commercial, sports, residential, public realm	15	Directors (4), senior associates (5), project architects (6)
Firm 3	Commercial, residential, retail, sports, education, defence	11	Senior associates (4), project architects (4), architects (3)
Firm 4	Transport, residential, commercial, retail	10	Senior associates (2), project architects (5), architects (3)
Total		49	

Participant	Professional tenure (yrs.)
<i>Director/Principle</i>	>20
<i>Senior Associate</i>	>15
<i>Project Architect</i>	>12
<i>Architect (licenced)</i>	>10
<i>Junior architect (not licenced)</i>	<5