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Defender, Disturber or Driver? The ideal-typical professional identities of HR practitioners

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to contribute knowledge about different professional identities represented among HR practitioners from Weber's "ideal types" framework.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on semi-structured interviews with 34 Swedish HR practitioners working in large public and private organisations.

Findings – The findings reveal that HR practitioners' identity is perceived as indistinct, unclear and shattered, which leaves lots of room for interpreting HR identity. Based on a thematic content analysis, three different ideal-type identities are presented, each representing the characteristic traits of an HR identity type. These are the Defender who always supports the managers, the Disturber who questions the managers in favour of the employees and the Driver who focuses on the economic expansion of the organisation.

Research limitations/implications – One of the potential constraints of this study is the authors' reliance on interview data. This finding implies that future research can employ mixed methods or observational techniques to bridge the gap between narrated responsibilities and real-time actions. The data source, predominantly from larger organisations, presents another limitation. This raises a significant research implication: there is a need to study identity formation among HR practitioners in smaller organisations. The theoretical framework this study contributes can aid in comprehending HR practitioners' identities and their corresponding actions. Continued research might explore the significance of these ideal-type identities.

Practical implications – The model presented provides a new way of understanding HR practitioners' complex and shattered professional identity and the various stakeholders that direct different expectations towards them. This knowledge can be used both in HR education and in HR work as a basis for discussing the social work environment of HR practitioners and negotiating their work and identity.

Originality/value – The study contributes knowledge of the professional identities of HR managers, an under-researched area, especially when it comes to empirical research about the HR practitioners' own experiences of their everyday work and view of the HR profession.

Keywords Professional identity, Ideal types, Ideal-type identities, HR practitioners, Social categorisation, Qualitative approach

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In modern organisations, the qualifications and competence of human resource (HR) practitioners are discussed based on expectations that new roles, such as strategic advisors,

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change makers and business partners (Ulrich, 2020; Ulrich *et al.*, 2008), are more demanding and complex, necessitating diverse skills and knowledge (Cohen, 2015; Lo *et al.*, 2015; Ulrich *et al.*, 2017). More recently, the digitalisation of HR activities, involving an increased interest in HR analytics, artificial intelligence and HR automation, has also raised concerns regarding HR competence (McCartney *et al.*, 2021; Persson and Wallo, 2022). These changes reflect HR's growing importance in setting an organisation's overall direction and aligning its initiatives with the organisation's goals (Boxall and Purcell, 2016) while at the same time handling all the emotionally laden issues involved in the management of people (Rivers, 2019).

Despite these changes, there is a knowledge gap, concerning how HR practitioners perceive their work considering the increased focus on strategic human resource management (HRM) and organisational change. Little is known about how HR practitioners construct their professional identities (Pritchard and Fear, 2015; Syrigou and Williams, 2023), and how the identities are shaped through the negotiation of social legitimacy, contingent upon how HR practitioners' contributions are perceived by other practitioners (Buyens and De Vos, 2001). These kinds of external expectations are, together with internal senses of preferences and interests, relevant for forming a professional role (Reid, 2015). For HR practitioners, in particular, this negotiation process also involves defining the characteristics that should define HR work (Morley *et al.*, 2006; Sheehan *et al.*, 2016).

This gap warrants attention for several reasons. Firstly, understanding HR practitioners' identities can provide insight into how they navigate the changes in the HR field and how they align their actions with the goals and objectives of the organisation. Secondly, research is needed because many mainstream HRM models are too abstract or simplified, making them difficult to use in practice, which is beset with paradoxes, dynamism and role conflicts (cf. Keegan *et al.*, 2018; Wallo and Coetzer, 2022), creating what Legge (1995) famously referred to as a gap between the rhetoric and reality of HRM. These models are often based on a one-size-fits-all approach or too focused on the technical aspects of HRM without considering the broader organisational context and how HR practitioners learn their identities in connection to their daily work. Thirdly, it is important to gain knowledge of how HR practitioners' identity formation can inform the development of training, education and policies to support HR practitioners in their work. By understanding how HR practitioners navigate the complexities of the HR profession and how they interpret their identities within their organisations, it is possible to develop more effective competence development initiatives that are better aligned with the needs and context of the profession. This knowledge can also inform the development of higher education programmes for HR practitioners that focus on providing the necessary knowledge and skills for future generations of HR practitioners.

This study aims to contribute knowledge about different professional identities represented among HR practitioners from the framework of "ideal types". The study will use a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with HR practitioners to examine the various aspects that shape their professional identities. The findings of this study will provide insight into the current state of the HR profession and contribute to the broader literature on professional identities in the workplace.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews previous research on HR practitioners' work and professional identities. This section is followed by an outline of the study's theoretical points of departure. Subsequently, the methodology employed in the study is explained. The remaining sections present the findings, followed by a discussion that concludes with the study's conclusions and implications.

Previous research

HR practitioners have long struggled to establish their value as a professional group based on organisational and professional knowledge (Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Thompson, 2011;

Wright, 2008). This struggle indicates their ambition to elevate the status of HR as a profession.

In the dominating strand of HRM literature, this challenge has been mirrored, and sometimes even spurred on, by frameworks outlining key roles for HR practitioners. An early contribution was Storey's (1992) four roles for HR practitioners, including "handmaidens", providing administrative support and managing routine tasks; "regulators", focusing on implementing policies and ensuring legal adherence; "advisers", guiding managers and aligning HR practices with business strategies; and "changemakers", driving organisational change. Meanwhile, Ulrich's (1997) late 1990s framework outlines "employee champions", advocating for employee needs and creating a positive work environment, "administrative experts", managing daily HR operations and maintaining compliance, "strategic partners", collaborating with business leaders to develop strategies aligned with organisational goals, and "change agents", leading and managing organisational change.

The role frameworks have faced criticism for being overly prescriptive and simplistic, not fully capturing the complexity and dynamism of the HR function. Critics like O'Brien and Linehan (2014) argue that these models fail to adequately reflect the nuances of HR practitioners' work, including balancing diverse and often conflicting stakeholder interests. They assert that our understanding of the HR role remains incomplete despite extensive academic research and the creation of multiple typologies. The lack of substantial empirical evidence supporting these frameworks compounds these issues. These critiques suggest a need for research that better encapsulates HR work's real-world challenges and paradoxes, moving beyond static role descriptions towards more flexible and contextually sensitive depictions (Keegan *et al.*, 2018).

In an alternative and smaller research strand that draws on various critical perspectives, the focus is shifted from roles to norms, values and identities. Studies in this strand display a substantial part of self-doubt involved in HR practitioners' identity formation. In Berglund's (2002) study, a feeling of being inadequate in their professional role, caused by an inability to work more strategically, seems to pervade the HR practitioners' sense of professional identity. There is also evidence suggesting that while modern HR managers are developing a professional identity that allows them to perform multiple competing roles (Roche and Teague, 2012), the reality of these roles may not align with the idealised view presented in much HRM literature (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). Syrigou and Williams (2023) assert that HR practitioners typically possess a weak professional identity, which evolves later in their careers and is influenced by their organisational context, leading to an identity that intertwines organisational professionalism with HR professionalism. There is also a risk of conflicts where different roles within the same profession compete for legitimacy, affecting the construction of professional identities (Pritchard and Fear, 2015). Additionally, Wright's (2008) study demonstrated that the transformation of the HR specialist role into more of an internal consultant, offering strategic guidance to managers, inadvertently weakened the occupational identity and invited competition from other functional groups.

Studies have also shown that the identity formation of HR practitioners is affected by contextual factors. Heizmann and Fox (2019) showed that the identity of HR practitioners could be seen as a function of the power dynamics and broader discourse within their organisations. The HR practitioners' attempts to shape their identity and role as business partners were influenced by these factors and also by the ongoing need to demonstrate their value and impact on business performance. Heizmann and Fox (2019) concluded that identity formation is complex, nuanced and subject to varying degrees of conflict and struggle for legitimacy. In addition, it is a process shaped by agentic and subjective interpretations of what it means to be a professional (Bévort and Suddaby, 2016).

Similarly, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) suggest that HRM systems play a significant role in the identity formation of HR practitioners. According to the authors, HRM systems and

practices are not just technical or procedural elements; they also contribute to constructing meanings, values and orientations that HR practitioners use to navigate their work and cultivate a positive self-view. HRM is perceived to be integral to organisational and individual identity projects. In this sense, HRM is seen as a set of meanings and symbols that organisational members, including HR practitioners, draw upon to produce a particular view of the organisation and themselves. The paper points out the so-called “excess ceremoniality” in HRM practices, which contributes to forming beliefs about the organisation and its members. Despite the technical aspects of HRM, the practices can be seen as telling a positive story about the organisation, which becomes an essential part of the identity of HR practitioners. Furthermore, HRM practices facilitate the construction of “aspirational control”, where career progress tightly links to self-esteem. As HR practitioners interact with these systems, their identity is shaped in alignment with organisational hierarchy and ambitions.

Overall, based on our review of previous research, we see room for possible contributions. Firstly, the mainstream HRM literature often gravitates towards the more normative role frameworks that become too generic and abstract. There is a need for more studies based on critical perspectives and classical sociological theory to fully discuss the nuances of how HR practitioners’ roles are created and enacted. Consequently, this paper will use an ideal-type framework, providing a more systematic picture of how HR practitioners perceive their work and construct their professional identities.

Secondly, research in the field of HRM has focused mainly on Western contexts, leaving other countries understudied (Khatri and Budhwar, 2002). This paper studies the Swedish context because of its unique sociocultural and economic characteristics. Sweden stands out in the global HR landscape due to its strong emphasis on consensus-driven decision-making, widespread unionisation, a pronounced commitment to work-life balance, stringent labour legislation and a prevailing flat organisational structure (Bratton and Gold, 2017; Mabon, 1995; Wallo and Kock, 2018). Unlike countries with strong professional HR bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Society for HRM (SHRM), Sweden’s HR growth has been primarily shaped by local, organisational factors, such as specific industry regulations or local governance rules, collective agreements, and organisational culture and leadership. Each of these elements can play a crucial role in defining the professional identity of HR practitioners in Sweden.

Theoretical framework

Understanding professional identity through ideal types. In this paper, we draw on Weber’s (1949) ideal types as a theoretical lens (cf. Stapley *et al.*, 2022) to examine how HR practitioners construct their professional identities and how they may be shaped by the broader HR context in which they operate. Ideal types were first introduced by Weber (1949) to describe the characteristics of a social or cultural phenomenon. This classical concept is still relevant for understanding organisational and managerial aspects of how individuals relate to their professions (Frederiksen *et al.*, 2020). Swedberg (2018) underscores the merits of employing ideal types in empirical studies. Such a methodology proves particularly advantageous when delving into less-explored subjects, like the professional identity of HR practitioners.

Further, the construction of ideal types departs from patterns in multifaceted empirical descriptions. They are formed as pure cases, accentuating typical motives and actions, and, as such, help us come closer to an understanding (Verstehen) of social phenomena. The term ideal does not refer to values about what is desirable or aspirational. Rather, the types are ideal in that they represent pure and cohesive figures of thought that emphasise the most typical and characteristic traits that illuminate certain aspects of empirical reality. Furthermore, the concept of ideal types is an analytical tool to help us grasp the abstract

and sometimes casual aspects of reality (Eliaeson, 2000), for example, concerning everyday work.

As Weber states, ideal types must be constructed in the light of the cultural context of the phenomena they aim to analyse, in this case, the professional identity of HR practitioners. Central cultural components are, for example, language, habits and lifestyle (Eliaeson, 2000). As such, ideal types can enable a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors contributing to HR practitioners' professional identities and how these identities may impact their work and professional development.

In the process of constructing an ideal type, different social categories are structured, selected and combined. In this process, the actors' subjective perceptions of meaning behind their actions must be considered, as Weber views individuals' action and meaning-making as intertwined (Hekman, 1983).

Necessarily, the forming of ideal types is a process which reduces the multifaceted nature of social phenomena in order to present them in a straightforward and organised way. However, this allows for a presentation of complex aspects of the social world in a way that is understandable and easy to recognise. As social phenomenon is structured in a clearer way by using ideal types, comparison between them is facilitated (Shepherd, 2018) which may increase the understanding of a complex and diverse social world.

Sometimes, Weber's concept of ideal types is criticised due to a misreading of him, which suggests that ideal types should be viewed as existing in reality. Instead, by using ideal types, certain aspects and characteristics of reality are highlighted to illuminate the central features of a social phenomenon (Eliaeson, 2000), in this case the professional identity of HR practitioners. With this said, some ideal types may actually exist in reality, but not all of them and not always (Kuckartz, 1991).

To sum up, "the ideal type represents the idealized ('pure') typicality within a range of like case dynamics" (Gerhardt, 1994, p. 100). In this article, forming ideal types helps us grasp different types of HR identities and compare and relate them to each other.

Understanding identification through social categorisation. One way of understanding how individuals form identities in relation to each other, in, for example, an organisation, is to focus on the way they categorise themselves and others. The process of social categorisation involves identifying both similarities and differences between groups (Jenkins, 2000). Personal interests are a crucial part of identification, as our definition of ourselves and our definitions of our interests are hard to separate. How others perceive our interests relates to how they, in turn, perceive and categorise us as individuals (Jenkins, 2014). This means that in defining who we are as individuals, we must also identify who we are not. For example, we might be a victim and not an offender, or a police officer and not a thief. Thus, in identifying ourselves, similarities are as crucial as differences (Jenkins, 2000).

Another part of social categorisation concerns other people's views of us. The way that others categorise or label us evoke different reactions within us. Their categorisations may strengthen and confirm our image of ourselves, in which case we respond by internalising the categorisations, making them a part of our self-identification. Another option is to resist the categorisations, as we find them unfair or irrelevant, in which case the resistance becomes an integral part of our identification process. The categorisations we internalise and the ones we oppose, reveal a lot about our sense of who we are (Jenkins, 2000).

Jenkins (2000, p. 8) mentions two types of ideal-type identification. "*self- or group identification* (internally oriented) and the *categorisation* of others (externally oriented)". Social identification comprises other peoples' views of us, which are at least as important for the identification process as our image of who we are. Different identities are formed as people interact with each other in various types of institutions, where formal and informal secondary socialisation in the workplace is a part of identity formation (Jenkins, 2000).

In this paper, the way that HR practitioners *categorise* themselves towards different *ideal-type* identities will be analysed. Both theories concern mental images and focus on similarities and differences. Jenkins (2000) focuses on identity as a social phenomenon formed through interaction and categorisation of oneself and others. Weber's (1949) concept of ideal types helps us handle and understand the rich empiric material about the complex social phenomena of professional identity. Thus, the concepts of ideal types and social categorisation will here be used to complement each other in analysing HR practitioners' ideal-type professional identities.

Method

This study was part of a larger project comprising several sub-studies with different foci. The core data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) with 34 HR practitioners in eleven organisations in Sweden.

Our line of inquiry during the interviews centred around participants' day-to-day tasks, their work schedules and the workload volume, the nature of their work responsibilities and their interaction with other members within the organisation. Complementary to the interview dialogues, we incorporated organisational charts, internal literature and notations from the interview process to supplement our findings.

We set specific selection criteria for our participants. Our study aimed to engage full-time, non-managerial employees from HR departments with at least one year's work experience within the HR field. We intentionally excluded HR practitioners in managerial roles having subordinates, considering their expanded duties. These duties often involve executive functions such as budget planning and oversight, workforce recruitment, task delegation, employee development and performance evaluation. HR managers also wield more decision-making authority in contrast to their non-managerial counterparts. The exclusion of HR managers with direct reports was strategic. We recognised that the possibility of managerial duties "leaking into" their account of a regular HR practitioner's daily operations was significant. Hence, to ensure the integrity of our study, we sought participants who primarily engage in non-managerial HR tasks.

The average professional experience in HR among our participants was approximately ten years. They were, on average, 42 years old. Most of them had acquired a university degree with a focus on HR. Our study composition included 25 participants from public sector institutions such as municipalities and county councils, and nine participants were employed in private-sector businesses. Concerning the gender of the participants, 26 were women, and eight were men (Table 1).

In the broader context of the HR profession in Sweden, our respondent demographics reflect specific national trends (Berglund, 2002; Lindeberg and Månson, 2015; Löfgren Martinsson, 2008). Historically, the HR sector in Sweden has seen a higher representation of women, and our sample aligns with this gender disparity. The emphasis on academic qualifications, especially at the university level focusing on HR, is common in the profession, underscoring our sample's predominant educational background.

In this study, the ethical guidelines for research with humans were adhered to. Written and oral information about the study was presented in advance to enable informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed about how the data would be used and stored. No sensitive personal data were collected.

Interviews were conducted in meeting rooms at the respondents' workplaces. These lasted between 50 and 90 min and were recorded and fully transcribed. The data analysis procedures followed the recommendations of Miles *et al.* (2014). The first phase of analysis began immediately after the initial interviews to ensure that data collection instruments were appropriate for the study setting and were honed to pursue emerging issues so that new and

HR position	Education level	Experience (year range)	Sector	Organisation employee span
HR consultant	University	10–15	Public	10,000–15,000
HR coordinator	University	10–15	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	5–10	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	10–15	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	0–5	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	20–25	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	0–5	Public	10,000–15,000
HR Consultant	University	5–10	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	10–15	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	5–10	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	5–10	Public	10,000–15,000
HR Consultant	University	0–5	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	10–15	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	0–5	Public	500–1,000
HR consultant	University	0–5	Public	500–1,000
HR consultant	University	5–10	Public	500–1,000
HR consultant	University	25–30	Public	500–1,000
HR specialist	University	10–15	Public	1,000–5,000
HR consultant	University	5–10	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	0–5	Public	10,000–15,000
HR specialist	University	5–10	Public	10,000–15,000
HR consultant	University	0–5	Public	10,000–15,000
HR strategist	Upper Secondary	25–30	Public	10,000–15,000
HR strategist	University	10–15	Public	10,000–15,000
HR strategist	University	15–20	Public	10,000–15,000
HR coordinator	Upper Secondary	5–10	Private	10,000–15,000
HR specialist	University	5–10	Private	5,000–10,000
HR specialist	University	5–10	Private	5,000–10,000
HR consultant	University	5–10	Private	500–1,000
HR business partner	Upper Secondary	20–25	Private	1,000–5,000
HR business partner	University	10–15	Private	1,000–5,000
HR business partner	University	10–15	Private	1,000–5,000
HR business partner	University	5–10	Private	10,000–15,000
HR business partner	University	10–15	Public	5,000–10,000

Table 1.
The respondents

Source(s): Created by authors

potentially better data could be collected. The transcripts were imported into the QSR NVivo software programme in the second phase. Descriptive nodes, derived from the theoretical background of this paper and the interview questions, were used to get an overall picture of each interview: “Working assignments”, “How the work is learned?”, “Important competence for the work”, “The individuals’ views of the HR profession” and “The individuals’ perceptions of other people’s views of the HR professions?”. The coding process helped us to organise and interpret the interview data. In the final phase, we discussed findings from previous steps and developed a shared understanding of the data concerning existing research. The analysis and interpretation process involved an iterative interaction between data and theory (Danermark, 2002).

To further grasp aspects relating more directly to professional identity, the dictums were read again and further analysed for categories and patterns. In the next step, the material was categorised under the following analytical questions: “What is done?” For whom is it done?” and “Why?”. Three different ways of navigating between different perspectives, roles and images of the HR vocation could be discerned in analysing these categories. The HR

practitioners navigated between the perspectives of the managers and the employees, between providing support and critique and between professional pride and images of the HR profession as unclear and shattered. A deeper and more deductive analysis of these categories and different ways of navigating, using Webers' (1949) ideal types as a theoretical lens, reveals patterns concerning similarities and differences in the material, which can be understood as three different ideal type HR identities.

Findings

In this section, we first explore the overall ambiguity and uncertainty that characterise the HR profession. This uncertainty paves the way for diverse interpretations of the HR identity. Against this backdrop, we then present our interview findings through the lens of three ideal-type identities. Each of these identities – the Defender, the Driver, and the Disturber – illustrates a characteristic way in which HR practitioners connect with their work and professional identity.

An indistinct and unclear identity

One overarching theme in the interviews is the perception of HR practitioners as having a wide-ranging, unclear and indistinct identity. As one of the HR practitioners put it: "HR is trying to find their identity".

This uncertainty is expressed by the interviewed HR practitioners and people close to them. For example, the interviewees sometimes find it hard to define HR-related issues or answer questions about their daily work. One of the interviewees described how the unclarity of his work is somewhat of a joke amongst his group of friends even though he had tried to explain it to them numerous times: "Still, none of my friends understands what I work with".

Some HR practitioners think of HR work as having gone from a secluded position to a more visible one. There is also a perception of HR as having a weak mandate and a lack of status. This is sometimes related to the ambiguousness of the HR role and the need to clarify and define it.

... you can use HR for whatever. We don't need to lock it in and define it. The broader, the better, then we can use it. It feels like it has been that way; now it's like you have started to look at it; can we refine it? Is it possible to frame it? What is it that we really do? And I think more and more has happened with that, but at the same time, it's so broad; HR can do so very much, and I think that makes it hard.

Other images of the HR role that relate to its broadness and ambiguousness are that HR is expected to prioritise everything, which makes it hard to handle the workload. Another perception that has been said to HR practitioners is that anyone could do their job. Furthermore, the HR practitioners describe how they often are perceived as having a seclusive and secretive position.

Well ... sometimes you've heard that, you know, you guys at HR are a bit secretive, one never knows what it is that you really do ... then you're like 'no but you're not supposed to have that kind of insight into everything we do'.

The seclusion, ambiguity and unclearness of the HR role seem to leave the HR practitioners with some frustration and room for personal interpretation of their professional identity and its values. In the following text, this variation is expressed through different ideal-type professional identities discerned in the interviews.

The Defender

One ideal type expressed in the interviews is that of the HR practitioner as a Defender of the managers. The Defender provides support and advice and functions as a sounding board regarding "everything under the sun". The role is to relieve, unburden and facilitate the

managers in their daily work, thus defending the managers' social and psychological work environment. The Defender can be understood as somewhat of an assistant to the managers, always guarding their needs.

We are first and foremost an instrument for the managers and employers.

The Defender notes that their role would be redundant if the managers stopped asking them for advice and support. To serve the managers with, for example, mental support, such as coaching and encouraging them in different ways, the HR practitioners need to win the managers' trust; the ability to do this is viewed as the most vital competence by the Defender. If the managers do not trust the Defender, they will not reveal their insecurities. Understanding and being a good listener as the managers talk openly about what is bothering them is a crucial competence for the Defender, and sometimes the HR work is about "pure therapy".

I perceive my job as very much about . . . well my role is to support managers in HR issues but how they want to be supported, (. .) it's kind of like you must adapt yourself to the managers . . .

This image of the HR practitioner as mostly existing as a tool of support for the managers is repeated, and one of the interviewees means that in their workplace, "it is something that you almost describe as a mantra". The close relationship with the managers is a significant focus point among the Defenders, and sometimes the managers' need for a close relationship consumes the HR practitioners.

99% of everything is focused on the managers and some managers are great and some are less fun (to work with) *laughter*

The Defender's mission is to help the managers feel safe and secure in their role and to understand, adapt to and fend for their needs.

But it (value) is most often what the manager needs, regardless of what that is.

The Defender has a great understanding of the managers and their workload and want to do everything in their power to unburden them, thus defending their work environment. They also read the individual managers and their specific needs so that they may defend them by offering different sorts of support and assistance. The Defender wishes to be constantly available for the managers, which sometimes leads to consequences for their personal life.

. . . my previous boss did not need sleep at all, she worked, and she commuted weekly, so she kind of had no social life here (. .); if she worked all the time, it happened that it was kind of spilt over to me too, so then I worked all the time, from eight to eight, like every day and weekends, so it got so crazy (. .).

This total dependence on the managers can also be related to a hierarchy where the managers are rated higher than the HR practitioners, leaving them "sometimes a little afraid of the manager".

We exist first and foremost for the managers, and we don't want them to feel that we are a burden, that we only come with our pointers and say, "you are not allowed to do that".

A balance between being supportive and putting the needs of the managers first, like the Defender, but also being able to question the managers when needed and stand up for one's competence is emphasised in the interviews and further elaborated in the next ideal type.

The Disturber

Another ideal-type identity that can be understood as somewhat of an opposite to, and a critical reaction to, the Defender is called the Disturber. The Disturber emphasises the importance of having the courage to question, critique and oppose the managers, when

necessary, not letting oneself be reduced to an uncritical assistant, always giving the managers what they want and defending their every need.

But then, it is vital as HR not to become a slave. Because you can quickly become one if you keep saying yes all the time.

The Disturber focuses on the need for HR practitioners to stand up for one's competence and professionalism. This focus appears to be of more excellent value to them than always supporting the managers by adapting to their every need. The Disturber sometimes questions the role of HR as a Defender. They are aware of the social nature of HR work but highlight the need to sometimes be inconvenient and say what needs to be said.

Many HR practitioners are very relationship-oriented, which is often very good. However, sometimes you also need to fight a little and handle a little conflict and be a little unpleasant, be challenging (. . .) be able to put your foot down and be a bit firm and clear.

The Defender thinks the managers sometimes need to be questioned about recruitment, ensuring the company or organisation follows the rules and regulations and, for example, does not discriminate. To not accept a role as subordinate to the managers but rather stand up for labour law issues and collective agreements is crucial for the Disturber.

You need to dare to believe in your profession because otherwise, you will not be able to show the added value all the time of your profession. And not only oblige and curl either but dare to say no sometimes. "I believe in that very much; you can't do that, you are not allowed to do that, it's not okay according to labour laws".

Taking the role of the Disturber appears to imply standing up for the rights of the employees, giving them a voice and defending their needs.

I've been involved in situations where you have to say to a manager, "No, we can't push the issue this far, here we have to, here we have these rules that exist for the sake of the employees, which we can't toll on".

Even though the Disturber may sometimes make life inconvenient for the managers, this type of HR practitioner also gains acknowledgement and appreciation for their attitude. One of the HR practitioners who was about to quit their job received positive feedback about their ability to set boundaries.

Since I resigned, many people have said, "You have been driven, and you have set boundaries", so I think I had made some sort of impression when I stood and yelled at the managers, being pissed at times.

As the Disturber emphasises the need to stand up to the managers when needed, they also illuminate the managers' dependence on HR practitioners. HR practitioners often possess knowledge that the managers are dependent on and thus are in a dependent relationship with HR. This may be especially true when the manager is new or insecure. According to one of the HR practitioners, one manager expressed their dependence on them like this.

You have to, well you are my lifeline, the only one who can save me.

Furthermore, the Disturber wants to be one step ahead of the managers to prevent them from constantly coming into their office asking for advice. Overall, the managers' weaknesses and insecurities are noted by the Disturber, as is the need for a courageous and competent HR practitioner.

The Driver

The third ideal-type identity strictly focuses on business and profit. It views the role of HR practitioners as valuable if they can add efficiency, productivity and economic profit to their

organisations. HR work is being viewed as a selling profession, or as one of the HR practitioners put it:

“Yesterday’s HR consultants are the telemarketers of tomorrow”.

According to the Driver, the value added by the HR practitioner consists of providing support for expanding the organisation, assisting the managers with the business plans and helping managers concretise their needs. It is about driving the organisation in an efficacious direction. Further, the Driver often focuses on marketing the organisation they represent through, for example, working with employer branding. This sometimes implies a change in the role of HR practitioners:

It (HR) has gone from being more of a person that handles the salaries to “we need to listen to what they say because they know the market best”.

The Driver often wants to accurately measure the work and value of the HR practitioner, for example, through the “satisfied customer index”. Ultimately, the value added by HR relates to the organisation’s profit.

It is utmost that *name of organisation* should make money (. . .) HR work would not exist if it did not generate a higher profit.

The work of HR affects the entire organisation, and HR should understand and work close to “the business”, striving to drive the company towards success. That means that the added value HR provides ends up with the owners.

We should work for it to be smooth, that there will not be much slack in the daily processes (. . .) When we come in and work with groups, well, it is the sort of thing that perhaps does not add value in the form of money. However, it can add much value to the cooperation or . . . efficiency in a group.

One aspect of providing the organisation with higher efficiency is ensuring that the managers are competent enough to make their employees feel good, which implies the managers coaching to drive the organisation towards successful results. Driving the organisation’s strategic success is focused, even concerning personal behaviours.

We want to encourage good behaviours; we do not want behaviours that do not add value to *the name of the organisation*.

In the end, HR is driven by the organisation, and they want to be recognised as more than a support for the managers and employees.

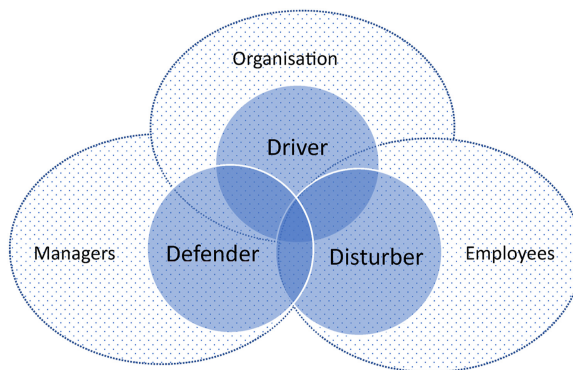
What I do, I need to somehow contribute to that profit, the plus on the bottom line.

The Driver notes a risk that HR will be perceived as too abstract, mostly working with well-being, soft issues and “nice words”. Instead, the Driver wishes to emphasise profit and business as crucial aspects of their profession.

A tentative model for ideal-type professional HR identities

This section discusses the findings using the concepts of ideal types (Swedberg, 2018; Weber, 1949) and social categorisations (Jenkins, 2000). To guide the discussion, we propose a tentative model that visualises the ideal-type professional identities and the stakeholders they are each mainly focused on (Figure 1). The model is formed against the background of the empirical dictums describing the daily work of HR practitioners.

The model envisages how the Driver is focused chiefly on the profits and efficacy of the organisation, while the Defender’s work is first and foremost directed to meet the needs of the managers. The Disturber focuses on the needs of the employees, as the managers, according to the Disturber, need information and sometimes a critical eye to ensure the rights of the



Source(s): Created by authors

Figure 1.
A visualised presentation of the three ideal type professional identities of HR practitioners

employees. The model also illustrates how the ideal-type professional identities, and their areas of focus, are integrated and overlapping rather than separated or demarcated. The model does not, as such, represent the empirical reality but instead envisages its central elements as ideal types (Eliaeson, 2000) that sometimes, but not always, emerge in reality (Kuckartz, 1991). It is not a model that illustrates an ideal image of how HR should work in the best of worlds, as, according to Weber (1949), that is not the function of ideal types.

Instead, it describes the vagueness and difficulties that HR practitioners face as they try to define their profession in a complex working life, filled with paradoxes and ambiguities (cf. Keegan *et al.*, 2018). The shattered and undefined role of HR practitioners is made visible in the middle of the model, illustrating the struggle of HR practitioners to define their professional values (Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Thompson, 2011; Wright, 2008). Furthermore, the shattered nature of the HR role can shed light on the stark differences in ideal types. The HR identity, often loosely defined, remains open to interpretation. Each organisation or manager might hold distinct and explicit expectations. This diversity of roles and responsibilities can give rise to feelings of fragmentation, leaving HR practitioners navigating a maze of diverse expectations and competing priorities (Syrigou and Williams, 2023). The HR practitioners that try to fulfil the expectations tied to the Defender, the Disturber and the Driver aim to simultaneously satisfy the needs of the managers, the employees and the organisations' economic interests. Navigating between these expectations and incorporating the three ideal types found in relation to HR work is, to say the least, an ambiguous and weakly defined identification process. The HR practitioners and the people they relate to have trouble defining HR's role and the assignments tied to it (Berglund, 2002). This is a sign that internal identification and external categorisation (Jenkins, 2000) go hand in hand, as others' definitions of the identity of HR are often internalised and have the potential to strengthen the HR practitioners' image of their own identity as unclear and indistinct (Syrigou and Williams, 2023).

All three ideal-type identities are clearly defined by the HR practitioners against other types of identities with which they disidentify. The potential provided for comparing different aspects of the social world with each other is stressed as a great advantage of using ideal types analytically (Shepherd, 2018). One of our theoretical contributions is that we add the element of social categorisation in order to reinforce comparison and relate the ideal types in a clear and concise way to each other. Each ideal type departs from a self- or group identification (Jenkins, 2000), where defining differences from other identities is an integral part of the identification. Being something implies not being something else (Jenkins, 2000).

The Defender is, first and foremost, someone who supports the managers, and not someone who is a nuisance to them by, for example, correcting them and telling them what they are not allowed to do. The expectations and needs of the managers are prioritised over the needs of the employees or the economic profits of the organisation.

On the other hand, the Disturber identifies as a courageous critic that questions the managers when needed to ensure the rights and needs of the employees. The Disturber is an independent critic, not a “slave” or a “yes-man” to the managers. The Disturber advocates for the employees, while the Defender can mainly be understood as an advocate for the managers. Regarding the third ideal type, the Driver, the profits and the organisation’s efficiency come first. They define themselves as a business partner who helps drive the organisation towards success and expansion. They are not soft and fuzzy HR practitioners working with abstract interventions.

The fact that the three ideal-type identities aim to live up to the needs and expectations of three different stakeholders (the managers, the employees and the organisation) reveals that various power relations function as backdrops for HR practitioners in finding their identity. This is a way of illuminating the cultural context in which the ideal types are created and depicting their central characteristics (Eliason, 2000). As HR practitioners act in various ways to handle the professional culture in which they find themselves, their agency in the form of individual meaning-making and motivation is central (see Hekman, 1983). Our ideal types thus represent not only different ways to act in relation to the HR-profession but also the various ways HR practitioners are actors in ascribing meaning to their work and their culture. This model aims to capture the influence of the different stakeholder perspectives and how navigating between these can be seen as a complex process included in HR work. This perspective has been missing in other models of HR work (O’Brien and Linehan, 2014). The HR practitioners are the executors or advocates for the needs and wills of someone or something other than themselves. The way that the HR practitioners navigate between these different forms of expectations says something about how they identify themselves and towards what ideal type they strive. They act as agents when subjectively forming their own professional identity (Bévert and Suddaby, 2016) as HR practitioners.

According to previous research, how the professional identity of HR practitioners is formed is connected to what counts as a value in their specific organisation. Identity formation can thus be viewed in the light of a search for professional legitimacy (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Heizmann and Fox, 2019), something that HR practitioners are known for struggling to achieve (Berglund, 2002; Heizmann and Fox, 2019; Thompson, 2011; Wright, 2008).

In the distinctive context of Swedish HRM, the three roles take on unique nuances influenced by the nation’s sociocultural and organisational dynamics (Bratton and Gold, 2017; Mabon, 1995; Wallo and Kock, 2018). The Defender ensures management aligns with Sweden’s consensus-based approach and egalitarian principles. The Disturber highlights Sweden’s commitment to work-life balance by pushing back against decisions that risk these values. Meanwhile, the Driver balances financial goals with Sweden’s broader societal expectations and corporate responsibility. Together, these roles show Swedish HR practitioners’ challenges when merging organisational goals with national values.

To summarise, this study’s theoretical contribution consists in a framework that can be used to investigate and increase the understanding of HR practitioners’ identities, and thereby also of their actions. Identities are formed through the social categorisation of oneself in relation to others (Jenkins, 2000) their expectations and the individuals’ internal interests (Reid, 2015) as well as how others perceive those interests (Jenkins, 2014). The ideal-type identities that this study found describe how they navigate the expectations they encounter in their profession, and how they align their actions with the goals and objectives of the organisation. As organisations may have unclear or contradictory values, the ideal types can

be used to further understand the tensions and navigations created in such a context. They may also reveal contradictions between the HR practitioners' personal values and the different values of the organisation. Identity formation is pervaded by both external categorisations (Jenkins, 2000). Of course, one empiric case often has traits related to more than one ideal type, as the ideal types are meant to facilitate the empirical complex and multifaceted reality. Empirically, ideal types seldom emerge in real life, but are representations of typical traits or characteristics (Eliaeson, 2000).

Limitations and implications for research

This study offers valuable insights into HR practitioners' identities and the social and organisational contexts in which they operate. While contributing to the literature in the HR field, it is vital to acknowledge the limitations and their implications for future research.

One of the potential constraints of this study is our reliance on interview data. This approach could lead to discrepancies between what HR practitioners say about their roles and what they actually do in practice. However, it is essential to note that the primary objective was to explore participants' identity construction, making such disparities less critical. This finding implies that future research can employ mixed methods or observational techniques to bridge the gap between narrated responsibilities and real-time actions, providing a more holistic understanding of HR practitioners' roles and work practices.

Our data source, predominantly from larger organisations, presents another limitation. The size of an organisation influences the nature of tasks, work context and dynamics among HR practitioners – factors crucial in shaping professional identities. This raises a significant research implication: there is a need to study identity formation among HR practitioners in smaller organisations, which often have limited HR resources (Atkinson *et al.*, 2022; Cardon and Stevens, 2004). Investigating how a smaller scale impacts the three identities we have defined would further enrich the discourse.

Geographically, our study focused on Sweden, known for its strong labour laws and influential trade unions (Bratton and Gold, 2017). This geographic specificity suggests that the practices of HR practitioners might be tailored to this particular context. Future research should look beyond Sweden to validate the three identities identified, examining HR practices and identity development in different settings.

The theoretical framework this study contributes can aid in comprehending HR practitioners' identities and their corresponding actions. Ideal-type identities, rooted in social categorisation (Jenkins, 2000), offer insights into how HR professionals navigate organisational expectations. Such identities are particularly beneficial in organisations with unclear or contrasting values, highlighting potential tensions HR practitioners face. Continued research might explore the significance of these ideal-type identities for organisational culture and objectives.

While our framework is situated within the context of HR practitioners, it is neither normative nor empty of context. It emphasises the broader organisational setting and daily work experiences. The proposed ideal types presented should instead be considered as a result of the broader organisational context and how they learn identity in relation to their daily work, which previous models have been criticised for lacking. Moreover, the ideal-type identities posited here might also be applicable to other professional groups. This study thereby provides a theoretical starting point or inspiration for further studies of professional identities.

Implications for practice

Concerning practical contributions, the results of the study can be used in educational purposes. By understanding how HR practitioners navigate the complexities of the HR

profession and how they interpret their identities within their organisations, it is possible to develop more effective competence development initiatives that are better aligned with the needs and context of the profession. This knowledge can also inform the development of higher education programmes for HR practitioners that focus on providing the necessary knowledge and skills for future generations of HR practitioners.

Additionally, the results of the study can be used in the organisation to support HR practitioners in their work. Based on the three ideal-type identities found, policies within the organisation can be developed to better match the needs of the practitioners. The results can also be used as a development initiative to increase the understanding of the HR profession among other professional groups. With an increased understanding of “the other”, their motives and challenges, a more efficient collaboration can be reached which will benefit the entire organisation.

Conclusions

This paper arrives at several noteworthy conclusions. Firstly, we delineate three ideal-type professional identities that provide insights into the complex and uncertain process of identity formation among HR practitioners. These identities encompass the “Defender”, safeguarding managerial interests; the “Disturber”, challenging managerial decisions while advocating for employee rights; and the “Driver”, focusing on propelling the organisation towards financial gain.

Secondly, these professional identities shed light on the intricate navigation HR practitioners must undertake in prioritising the needs of various stakeholders during their identification process. Stakeholders include managers, employees and organisational leaders, with the latter chiefly invested in the organisation’s expansion and economic growth. Consequently, HR practitioners find themselves caught between aligning with or integrating diverse expectations. This predicament can potentially evoke stress and engender a sense of role ambiguity and inadequacy (cf. Berglund, 2002; Pritchard and Fear, 2015).

Our third conclusion suggests that HR practitioners can enhance their organisational legitimacy by underscoring the value they contribute from a stakeholder perspective. The Defender argues that they deliver value to the managers, the Disturber to the employees and the Driver aligns with the organisation’s economic aspirations. Each HR practitioner’s ideal identity is contingent on their self-categorisation and the categorisation of others, which may correlate with their work-related interests (Jenkins, 2014).

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