

Research Article

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The critical incident negotiation process of public librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract: This paper reports findings from interviews with practicing public librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand. It details respondent understanding of influences on perception and behaviour, and critical incidents as they relate to librarian professional identity. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty practicing public librarians. Interviews were analysed with an inductive approach. Findings report on sample tendencies of dominant influences on practitioners' perception and behaviour, impacting professional identity development over time. Dominant influences are respondent understanding of the strongest aspect they understand to influence their professional identity for both their individual perception of their professional identity and social factors influencing their professional behaviour. Findings also report on the identity negotiation process prompted by critical incidents, whose criticality is reliant on individual perception of incident in relation to professional identity. This process outlines affective response to the critical incident as a gateway to identity negotiations, leading to a discovery and/or growth of an identity facet, which will either affirm or undermine identity understanding. This process may be iterative, as meaning ascribed to the incident may change over time. Three theoretical propositions are presented articulating the role of dominant influences and critical incidents on identity negotiations of public librarian professional identity.

Keywords: professional identity; public librarianship; critical incidents; identity negotiations; affective response.

1 Introduction

Professional identity is an avenue by which to explore influences on practitioners in a service-oriented profession. Professional context and environment influence a practitioner's self-perception, contributing to the construction of professional identity in a collective context (Whyte, 1956/2002), which can impact behaviour relevant to professional practices (Sundin & Hedman, 2009). Librarians, as the personification of the library, co-construct relationships with individual patrons and communities (Hicks, 2016b). Societal perception of the library profession is influenced to some extent by interactions with librarians. Adapting to social change, i.e., information technologies and behaviours, characterises this subsector (Preer, 2006). While the public librarian and library are uniquely situated in society, there is a dearth of research exclusively examining public librarian professional identity.

This paper reports findings from interviews with forty practicing public librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand. Specifically, it details the role of dominant influences on practitioners' individual perceptions of their professional identity development and to their professional behaviours in practice. This paper defines dominant influences as respondent understanding of the strongest aspect they understand to influence their professional identity for both their individual perception of their professional identity and social factors influencing their professional behaviour as it relates to this identity. It further details the role of critical incidents on identity negotiations and outlines this negotiation process. Finally, this paper offers a theoretical process of identity negotiation prompted by critical incidents and theoretical propositions articulating the role of dominant influences and critical incidents on identity negotiations of public librarian professional identity.

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2 Literature Review

2.1 Identity

Sociologically, identity is socially produced in a dynamic process over time and influenced by environment (Lawler, 2014). Identity encompasses what is presented to others and the reflective and reflexive inner-world of the self (Lawler, 2014; Mead, 1934). Interactions with others operate as a key catalyst for the iterative process of identity formation and negotiation. Identity can change as a consequence of new contextualities. Identity can be understood as an iterative process of composite aspects and influences, rather than possession or necessarily stable. Particularly, one's own perception of self coexists with outside perceptions of it; these perceptions are not identical and therefore exist in a complex relationship (Lawler, 2014). Thus, identity negotiations over time are pivotal to identity development.

2.2 Professional identity

One's profession is the core influence to the development of a distinct identity. Professional identity is the product of the impact the organisational and/or professional life has had on one's understanding of the self within its context (Whyte, 1956/2002). This identity forms from the foundation of the preexisting identity (Trede et al., 2012). It results from self perception within and relation to a collective occupation, influencing behaviour and discourse in the professional context (Sundin & Hedman, 2009).

Professional identities are influenced by and through behaviour, contributing to the construction of social practices (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005), thus perceiving, acting toward, and constructing certain contextualities. Socialization conveys collective values and status quo behaviours. Behaviours express the degree of affiliation to the profession, enacting the extent to which these values and expectations have been adopted and in what way. Participation through forms of communication within the profession, such as through association bodies, acts both to reinforce a collective conceptualization of a shared identity and contributes to its creation (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005, pp. 38-39). Professional participation prompts negotiation over time between an individual's perception of preexisting and professional identity relative to professional and social influences; it is "a constant negotiation of recognition between professional and other societal actors, and one's self" (Wise, 2012, p. 171). This negotiation requires practitioners to discover a context dependent integration of identities and their influences. Meaning creation through individual perception therefore informs identity development.

2.3 Librarian professional identity

Deciding to become a librarian is the first step to developing professional identity from the preexisting identity (Sare et al., 2012). While not the only entrance into the profession (e.g., Bushing, 1995), formal education provides for initial socialisation, internalisation of professional values, and inculcation to a common body of knowledge, professional culture, and behavioural norms (Holley, 2016; Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2016; Sare et al., 2012; Wilkins-Jordan & Hussey, 2014). Professional culture, such as represented through professional associations, provides access to a common identity and cultural norms (Preer, 2006), incorporated to varying degrees by the individual. Professional practice, as a set of behaviours, further defines professional identity through differentiation from other practitioners and professions (Sare & Bales, 2014; Sare et al., 2012). Over time, this identity becomes increasingly personalised (Fraser-Arnott, 2017b).

Critical incidents are suggested to play a key role prompting identity development and negotiations, as meaningful experiences contribute to the extant identity and the formation of its subsequent iterations (e.g., Duckett, 2001; Frye, 2018). Further discussion on critical incidents is provided below. Perception plays a key role in librarian professional identity negotiations and overall development, both those of practitioners and those of patrons/society, including stereotypes (Pierson et al., 2019). No existing literature could be identified addressing the precise nature of dominant influences on individual practitioner perception and behaviour in identity development nor on identity negotiations arising from critical incidents relating to librarian professional identity.

2.4 Professional behaviour

Professional identity influencing behaviour and discourse (Sundin & Hedman, 2009). On the professional level, when major events become a part of the profession's historical record, they have a lasting impact on the collective professional identity and resulting enacted behaviours (Preer, 2004). For example, the American Library Association's 1936 adoption of policies to support and expand local library services, signalling a shift in professional practice. Efforts in practice were to become more socially engaged, thus influencing professional behaviours (Preer, 2004, p. 145). This exemplar event can be understood as a collective identity enacting a change in behaviour, thus influencing the professional identity from which individual practitioners derive their own. Moreover, to face historic challenges, librarians have engaged in behaviours associated with lobbyists, publicists, and activists. "Librarians are continually in the process of defining their profession through practice" (Preer, 2006, p. 494), which evolves over time and context. Practice is therefore emblematic of professional behaviours enacted.

On the individual level, the decision of how to label and present one's self to others is an important aspect in professional identity (Fraser-Arnott, 2017a). Awareness of stereotypes can influence behaviour, for example through communication of occupational title. The choice to use a specific title can be influenced by an individual's perception of how it would be interpreted by others (p. 203). This awareness highlights that a sense of affiliation with a profession can be a dominant factor in perception and behaviour for some. Advocacy is an additional example of professional behaviour. It is a professional activity reinforcing professional identity wherein positive associations of the library and librarian are evoked, highlighting value through service (Hicks, 2016a). Service can be understood as a "core professional behaviour and hallmark of librarian professional identity" (Pierson et al., 2019, p. 422). Engaging in advocacy behaviours provides value to the patron by highlighting skills of the librarian while centring the practitioner's professional identity within this framework. Making it a central professional behaviour serves to challenge perceptions of the patron and practitioner (Hicks, 2016a, p. 615). Professional behaviour, therefore, can be understood as any behaviour relating to, and within, professional purview and linked with professional identity to some extent; whether in daily practice, association or conference participation, or actions, advocacy, etc. (Hicks, 2014, 2016a; Preer, 2006; Sundin & Hedman, 2009).

2.5 Critical incidents in identity development

As a way of exploring the effects on perception and behaviour associated with critical incidents, Flanagan (1954) developed the critical incident technique for scientific use. This technique is a set of procedures to collect data on observed incidents with special significance. Traditionally, the procedure consists of asking a prompt around a specific topic to relevant participants; collecting the data, typically through interviews; classifying the incident(s) relevant to study objective; analysing the data, which Flanagan notes to be an inductive process of category formation; and interpretation and reporting of results. Flanagan notes, however, this technique is "a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand" (p. 335).

Critical incidents were originally understood to be a complete occurrence, allowing inference and prediction, whose consequences are unambiguous and critical (Flanagan, 1954). Modified definitions emphasise 'critical' and 'incident' as based on the meaning and perception given to them by those who experienced them (Angelides, 2010). This paper understands critical incidents to be defined by two fundamental aspects: they are subject to the criticality assigned to them by respondents; and the conceptualisation of incident may be sufficiently complete or include an on-going, situational element (Angelides, 2010; Pierson et al., 2020). Such incidents may have a long-term influence on identity (Frye, 2018). How critical incidents are perceived contributes to their effect on identity (Linton, 2016).

Some have utilised this technique within the framework of professional identity, illustrating its adaptability and suggesting the deeper influence of such incidents on identity development (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). In library and information science research, Linton (2016) highlights the usefulness of exploring the relationship between professional identity and critical incidents. She explores identity development of medical librarians participating in curriculum review. A critical incident approach is not explicitly used, yet the results indicate that, for some in her sample, participation in the curriculum review developed their professional identity in some way. Duckett (2001) similarly suggests the usefulness of exploring critical incidents in professional identity development. While her case study of

practitioners volunteering in South African libraries did not use a critical incident technique, it highlights the influence of significant experiences. In each new experience, the extant identity is carried through and such experiences are evaluated based on past experiences. These new experiences then inform subsequent identity development. Frye (2018) utilizes a critical events approach to explore the influence of such events on the professional identity. For her sample of early career school librarians, these events tended to impact motivation to continue in the profession or contribute to a more defined conceptualisation of individual professional identity. As suggested above, critical incidents play a role in identity development. Others, however, have linked such incidents to world and self view, thus indicating an influence on perception as grounded through identity (Pierson et al., 2020). While linked to perception, no existing literature could be identified addressing the precise nature of identity negotiations arising from critical incidents. This paper, therefore, examines dominant influences on practitioner perception and behaviour specific to their professional identity development. This paper also reports on the identity negotiation process prompted by critical incidents.

3 Research Questions

This paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does practitioner understanding of dominant influence on professional behaviour impact identity development of practicing public librarians?
2. How does practitioner understanding of dominant influence on perception impact identity development of practicing public librarians?
3. How do critical incidents impact identity negotiations of practicing public librarians?

4 Methodology

Investigating new or underexamined phenomena, with a goal of theory building, necessitates qualitative methodologies (e.g., Charmaz, 2014). These methodologies allow for rich description of the complexities of varied perspectives (e.g., Luo & Wildemuth, 2017) and exploration of meaning and perception, while adhering to systematic procedures (e.g., Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This paper draws on a wider research project utilizing qualitative methods to examine the professional identity of public librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand. Inclusion criteria for the entire study were that respondents must: 1) Work within a public library and 2) Self-identify as a librarian. No parameters around respondent's position in the library or qualification(s) were imposed. For example, credentialization in Australia and New Zealand follow multiple pathways (e.g., Australian Library and Information Association, 2021; Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa, 2022), thus to have omitted those who undertake library practice, regardless of position and/or qualification, would have been an unjustifiable bias.

Phase 1 utilised a questionnaire administered online between November 2018 and January 2019, and participation was voluntary. The questionnaire included a section eliciting critical incidents, as incidents having influenced respondent identity as librarians and the meaning they ascribed to the incidents. These questions were:

1. Think of an important event or events that has/have impacted your identity as a librarian. Please describe the event(s).
2. Please elaborate on what specifically made the event(s) impactful to your identity as a librarian.

Phase 2 consisted of semi structured interviews with forty practicing public librarians. Respondent participation in Phase 2 was strongly supported by the questionnaire of Phase 1. Interview participants were purposefully selected from their indication of voluntary participation in follow-up interviews and their responses to the open-ended questions, both elicited in the questionnaire. Purposeful selection from the total sample of questionnaire respondents attempted maximum variance among participants. Interviews were conducted from March to September 2019 and an interview guide was developed from aspects of the Librarian Professional Identity Continuum (Pierson et al., 2019).

Interviews allowed participants to reflect on their professional identities and elaborate on the open-ended responses they gave in the questionnaire. Specifically, discussion of the critical incidents participants provided in their

questionnaire responses formed a central part of discussion in interviews. Researcher interpretations of the themes and sentiment of critical incidents provided in the questionnaire were verified or extended by participants in interviews. To probe deeper on the effects of critical incidents on professional identity, participants were asked the following questions when discussing critical incidents in interviews:

1. Why was this the critical incident you thought of when responding to the question?
2. How do you think it influenced how you see yourself as a librarian?
3. Why do you think it influenced you the way it did?

Initial responses to these questions concluded with sentiment verification by participants, i.e., whether the critical incident was perceived to be positive, negative, or expressing aspects of both positive and negative. Once verified, participants were asked in the interview setting to provide another critical incident of the opposite sentiment and the above questions were repeated. Where incidents displayed aspects of both positive and negative sentiment, another critical incident was elicited in a general way. Sentiment assessment of the critical incidents in interviews confirmed sentiment analysis of those provided in the questionnaire. Prompting of additional critical incidents in interviews allowed for deeper exploration of identity negotiations, offering comparison of identity negotiations based on sentiment.

Another central part of discussions centred on, in part, individual perception of influences on professional identity. In interviews, participants were prompted to elaborate on perceived influence on professional identity behaviour, whether they ‘brought’ their preexisting self or enacted a developed identity into their professional identity; and perceived influence on the perception of their professional identity, whether they viewed their perception or others’ perceptions as more influential on the development of their identity as a librarian.

The researcher transcribed all interviews. Analysis of all qualitative data adopted the inductive approach, whereby data were systematically collected, using constant comparison while concurrently collecting and analysing the data, with the aim to derive theoretical knowledge from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Preexisting assumptions about librarian professional identity precluded the use of formal Grounded Theory techniques, though the analytical method of coding was still useful and acceptable (Myers, 2013). The coding procedure included initial, focused, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). NVivo was used to code and query interview data. Excel was used for additional coding arising from NVivo queries and to arrange notations resulting from those queries. This paper reports the findings from the qualitative analysis of the interview foci of Phase 2, outlined above, as they relate to librarian professional identity development and negotiation. This research was granted ethical approval on 29 November 2018 by the Information Management Human Ethics Sub-committee of the School of Information Management, under the auspices of the Human Ethics Committee of Victoria University of Wellington, application number 0000027005.

5 Findings

Note that *Findings* will only focus on the forty interview participants.

5.1 Respondent Demographics

Most of the interviewed sample were New Zealand European (32, 80%), and of New Zealand nationality (33, 82.5%), revealing a predominantly homogenous sample. This sample also included representation of those from culturally diverse contexts, such as Māori, North/South American, and European. Due to scale and location of the population under study, reporting specific ethnicities and nationalities beyond the above risks confidentiality. Table 1 outlines gender and age demographic information. Table 2 outlines factors relating to respondent entry into librarianship. Table 3 outlines role and professional context at time of respondent reporting. These tables provide demographic information contextualising respondents and situating the data provided.

Table 1: General demographics of respondents.

		Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Female	37	92.5%
	Male	3	7.5%
Age Range	18-24	2	5%
	25-34	4	10%
	35-44	5	12.5%
	45-54	13	32.5%
	55-64	12	30%
	65-74	4	10%

Table 2: Respondent entry into librarianship.

		Respondents	Percentage
Entered librarianship from another profession	Yes	21	52.5%
	No	19	47.5%
Held library qualification with first library position	Yes	3	7.5%
	No	37	92.5%
Worked outside public library subsector	No	17	42.5%
	Yes	23	57.5%
Previous library subsectors ¹	Academic	10	25%
	Business	1	2.5%
	Ministerial	2	5%
	National	6	15%
	School	8	20%
	Special/Other	8	20%

¹ 3 respondents indicate three previous subsectors; 8 respondents indicate two previous subsectors

Table 3: Respondent contexts within librarianship.

		Respondents	Percentage
Library and information science/studies qualification(s) ¹	Sub-degree level ⁴	13	32.5%
	Degree level	7	17.5%
	Postgraduate or higher level	19	47.5%
	No professional qualifications	1	2.5%
Professional Association Registration (RLIANZA) ²	Yes	18	45%
	No	15	37.5%
Years worked in librarianship ³	0-5	3	7.5%
	6-11	6	15%
	12-17	11	27.5%
	18-23	3	7.5%
	24-29	9	22.5%
	30-35	4	10%
	36+	4	10%
Hours per week worked ³	21-30	6	15%
	31-40	24	60%
	41+	9	22.5%
Library setting ³	Urban	24	60%
	Suburban	6	15%
	Rural	9	22.5%
Association membership	Yes	33	82.5%
	No	7	17.5%

¹ 4 respondents indicated two or more qualifications; ² 7 respondents did not answer; ³ 1 respondent did not answer; ⁴ 1 respondent in this group also indicated they were currently pursuing an additional LIS qualification

5.2 Understanding of influences on behaviour

In interviews, respondents were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of influences on their behaviour. Specifically, they were asked which perceived influence was dominant, ‘bringing’ their pre-existing self into their professional identity or enacting an identity developed over time in the profession. This question was elicited to understand whether practitioners perceived a dominant influence on their professional identity through either their preexisting or professional identity and whether such an influence could be recognised. Dominant influence is understood as respondent understanding of the strongest aspect to influence their professional identity for both their individual perception of their professional identity and social factors influencing their professional behaviour as it relates to this identity. Findings indicate, with equal frequency, two predominant tendencies: bringing the preexisting self into a professional identity; and both bringing the preexisting self along with enacting a developed identity. These tendencies indicate influences on professional behaviour.

For example, Respondent K2 illustrates *bringing the preexisting self into professional identity*. They acknowledge “levels of appropriateness” and therefore boundaries on behaviour. They are candid, however, when admitting “I want to do things my way.”

I think probably bringing myself in... I do want to be honest, I do want to be myself. I don't wanna have to hide. I mean obviously there are different levels of appropriateness and different things for different situations. But overall, I'd always want to, and am, myself and even more so now. I want to do things my way.

Respondent R4 illustrates *both bringing preexisting self and enacting a developed identity into professional identity*.

It's a bit of both, really... 'cause, obviously there's a large part of me coming out, you know? When I'm using my personal knowledge and using my humour to deal with a lot of people. But you have got that library studies and your experience in libraries. You've got that long tradition behind you. And that public service and the polite face is all behind you and all our stuff we learn at library school and the degree before that, that all sort of influences how you're looking at [patron's] questions and how you can answer them.

They also acknowledge bringing some parts of their self into work. Respondent R4, by drawing on a “long tradition” of library studies, contrasts from Respondent K2. Respondent K2 did not emphasise library qualifications nor library professional “traditions” (as cited by Respondent R4), rather emphasised their preexisting self within the professional and identity context, saying that despite the recognition of professional demeanour, “...overall, I'd always want to, and am, myself and even more so now. I want to do things my way.” Respondent K2 emphasised that they were “even more so now” themselves and candidly stating that they desire their way of doing things.

Respondent R4, however, situates their identity within this “long tradition”, indicating an influence on that identity and, therefore, behaviour. They collocate their preexisting self with their developed identity. First, they cite their own knowledge and sense of humour. Then, they emphasise library professional traditions, citing “library studies”, “experience in libraries”, and “all our stuff we learn at library school.” Rather than emphasising their preexisting self as being dominant (i.e., Respondent K2), Respondent R4 characterises these influences in a more equitable way. First, they state “there's a large part of me coming out.” They continue by stating these library professional “traditions” (e.g., education) and previous degree “all sort of influences how you're looking at [patron's] questions and how you can answer them.” Respondent R4 illustrates that this collocation dynamic influences the co-constructed relationship with patrons: “how you're looking at [patron's] questions and how you can answer them.” The approach of interacting with people and providing a professional service is tied to both personal preexisting self (“obviously there's a large part of me coming out”) and a developed identity through professional education and experience.

A small number of respondents (3) indicated *enacting a developed self* as dominant, i.e., their sense of their professional identity which has developed over time in practice. These respondents also illustrated a demarcation, that this developed self is emphasised in reference to the role, with deemphasised reference to the preexisting self. For example, Respondent P2: “Yeah, it's fulfilling a role or a need with skills.” They also comment “it's possibly extra to organise one's identity around [the role].” In making this remark, Respondent P2 indicates that their developed self within the role has defined, minimalistic parameters and that anything beyond this is excessive. The dominant influence as enacting a developed self is expressed as, simply, “fulfilling a role” with professional skills. Their perception that it is “possibly” excessive to “organise one's identity around” the role also highlights the demarcation, that their developed

self in the role has parameters, suggesting their professional identity also has parameters. Thus, practitioner perception of influences on behaviour are emphasised as grounded in identity and influencing behaviour.

5.3 Understanding of influences on perception

Respondents were also asked to elaborate on their understandings of influences on their perceptions. Specifically, they were asked whether they viewed their self perceptions or others' perceptions of their identity as a librarian to be more influential on their professional identity development. This question was elicited to understand whether practitioners perceived a dominant influence on their perception of themselves as practitioners and whether such an influence could be recognised. Findings indicate two predominant tendencies: self perception as more influential; and both self and others' perceptions as more influential to professional identity development. The first tendency was most frequently cited, while the second was cited half as frequently. These tendencies also suggest influences on individual perception and behaviour.

For example, Respondent P1 illustrates *self perception* as more influential, highlighting their interests and passions as shaping their organisational role.

I think I have tended to evolve the job to suit me and my interests and passions. I mean, before I started as children's librarian, none of the children's librarians were doing [programming]. I started doing [programming] and they said 'oh, that's a good idea.' So now they all do [programming]. So, I've sort of moulded it.

They illustrate that they modified the role according to their perception of self, clearly stating "...I have tended to evolve the job to suit me..." and "...I've sort of moulded it", rather than it moulding them. These actions in professional practices are thereby situated within their own identity perceptions. In "moulding" the position to their interests, they illustrate their identity understanding as taking precedence and influencing professional behaviour.

Respondent N2, however, offers contrast illustrating *both self and others' perception* as more influential.

I mean, some of it's myself, how I see myself. But a lot of it is probably the influence of mentors and people who have trained me and shown me what to do, and what their attitudes and behaviours have been. And if I've respected them and what they've done, then of course you will, probably subconsciously, pick up on those things that you've liked about them... or the behaviours that they've done. It'll come to form part of your own... skill set, your own way of looking at things. It's not in isolation. 'Cause you'll do what you[re] doing, and then meet someone and don't like the way they're doing it, and say 'well, I'm gonna do it this way, it's more effective, I'll get a better result'. But otherwise...you can understand why they're doing it and how it worked, and work your way through, finding your method of doing it.

They discuss the impact of such influences as mentors on their behaviour, and subsequent identity development over time. Here, this influence is indicated by comparison of methods and results of some action with other practitioners, whose judgments are influenced by a mentor. They additionally allude to the influence of perception on behaviour, based here on respect of a mentor, by saying "you will, probably subconsciously, pick up on those things that you've liked about them... or the behaviours that they've done." Thus, N2 indicates perception of a way of doing, grounded in respect for another professional, which is carried through into their behaviour. In turn, this aspect is compared with other professional's methods and assessed by usefulness, saying "'well, I'm gonna do it this way, it's more effective, I'll get a better result.'"

A small number of respondents (3) indicated *others' perceptions* as more influential, for example Respondent C3. Thus, dominant influences on practitioner perception are emphasised as grounded in identity and influencing perception.

I think it has been influenced more by the people that I work with... I think that what's developed and changed me, is the people that I've worked with and the fact that we've questioned each other and worked with each other and discovered things together, and that was in that 25-year block. [M]ost of us stayed there a long time, so we got to know each other really well, so therefore we were prepared to question each other and challenge each other on what our thinking was and why did we think that...

5.4 Critical incidents prompting identity negotiations

Critical incidents have previously been demonstrated to influence perception as grounded in professional identity, as expressed through metaphors (Pierson et al., 2020). While this finding demonstrates impact on professional identity development, it does not provide a granular understanding of the negotiation process inherent in the influence on perception.

When participants were prompted as to why they provided the incident they did (i.e., why do you think that was the incident you thought of?), respondents consistently indicated an affective response as closely associated with the nature of its influence. Affective responses varied by the perceived sentiment of the critical incident itself, creating a sliding scale from general or specific, and positive to negative accounts of affective states. Affect is suggested as a primary reason why particular critical incidents come to mind first. For respondents, this is attributable to how the critical incident made them feel, indicating affect as an entry point to subsequent identity negotiations. This is demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Affective response.

Respondent A4 Positive Critical Incident	Respondent R1 Negative Critical Incident
“Yeah, so why I think about that is... I think it was a very touching moment... that that kid ask[ed] about that.”	“Because he got really aggressive, so it was quite unpleasant...continuing to come into the library and so I was quite wary. And I was very wary from the other staff just to make sure that they didn’t have an experience like that with him. And it’s probably the most unpleasant experience I’ve had in my current job...”

When participants were prompted for perceived nature of the influence of incidents (i.e., how do you think it influenced you the way it did?), respondents indicated a direct influence on perception of their identity. Positive incidents tended to affirm the already existing perception of the identity. Affirmation was closely followed by indications of discovery and/or growth of a facet of the identity. Discovery can be understood as being made aware of some new or previously unknown facet of the practitioner’s identity, such as discovery of an underdeveloped skill set. Growth can be understood as further development of an already known facet of identity, such as developed confidence to identify as a librarian. This finding indicates that while an identity can be affirmed, it is not stagnant.

Other examples from the data of facets of identity that participants discovered or were enhanced include a desire to enact different behaviours from those experienced in the past, such as with negative incidents; a discovered pride in being a librarian; a strengthening of pride in being a librarian; and legitimacy of being a professional as linked to a body knowledge and qualifications. With each positive experience influencing identity comes growth and/or discovery of some new or different facet of identity. Discussions of positive incidents affirming the preexisting conceptualisation of identity often indicated a cooccurrence with development which supported affirmation; for example, Respondent A5 illustrates this dynamic through a sense of validation. This was either through action or perception, thus reinforcing perceived value of certain professional behaviours.

I think it’s validated that...you enrich people’s lives by what you’re doing. And, sometimes you wonder if you really do.... I think it does validate a lot of the other stuff that you do, that you’re never quite sure what the effect it has, but I think... it does positively impact people’s lives, being able to talk about reading and shared experiences and things like that.

Negative critical incidents showed a similar dynamic, where discovery of an identity facet was often cited, followed by growth, and affirmation of identity. Another example from the data of facets of identity that participants discovered or were enhanced include a sense of limitation for professional opportunities due to lack of library or related qualification, regardless of the qualifications held. The dynamic associated with negative critical incidents also demonstrates that with such experiences comes growth and/or discovery of some new or different facet of identity. Negative incidents were, however, also more associated with undermining, eroding, or acting as a barrier to the identity, for example, Respondent S2:

[I]t kind of made me doubt a little bit, you know? Am I just old hat, rehashing old things, am I the old woman who wants to be in charge of everything and really a bit past it and things like that?...[It made me doubt my] relevancy and capability and up-to-dateness (sic)...I did stop and think 'is it time for me to move on? Is it time to, to go and find something else? Am I right for this?' So, it does, yeah, amazing how one thing can kind of get you thinking in a different way.

This dynamic suggests that incidents perceived to be negative have the potential to undermine an identity and are more likely to do so rather than positive critical incidents. It is the perception of the incident, however, which informs the course of identity development. This further indicates that an individual's preexisting and professional identities are in ever precarious connection with each other, and their relationship is subject to the meaning ascribed to the incidents which impact their connection over time. For example, continuing with Respondent S2:

And it's like, 'ok, right, no. I know this is the right thing', so...[the doubt] didn't stay, no. There's still probably a little niggles at the back, but, I think that all of us have had little niggles of doubt about things.

They immediately continue with expressing rejection of the doubt which undermined their professional identity, indicating that it "didn't stay" and similarly acknowledging "...I think that all of us have had little niggles of doubt...". Respondent S2's rejection of the undermining of identity illustrates that the incident, while critical, did not meet a threshold by which to create a lasting sense of undermining, rather they reason that such feelings of doubt are shared among others.

Negative incidents, however, also prompted discovery of some facet of identity, indicating that negative incidents can encourage this specific aspect of identity negotiations. This finding highlights the importance of the meaning ascribed to the incident and subsequent influences on identity. Of note, negative incidents tended to be more associated with affirmation of identity rather than undermining. This finding supports the assertion that it is not the nature of the event alone which dictates its influence on identity negotiations, but also the individual's perception of it over time (which is collocated with their perceptions of their dominant influences), as illustrated by Respondent C2:

I think in a situation like that you do end up...evaluating, reevaluating where you are. When people challenge you, you do question whether your decision making is sound. But then you sort of come out the other side having been through it, the processes of self criticism, thinking 'ok, no, I did make the right decision, I did behave in a way that was professional and adult' and so on. I didn't get the outcome that maybe I would have liked, but, the end of the day, it doesn't really matter that much... carry on. And so in terms of maybe denting my, sort of, confidence as a librarian, it didn't really have an effect at all. It was a minor irritant. It didn't cause me to, you know, adjust the view I had of myself as a librarian.

When participants were prompted for reasons for the influence of incidents (i.e., why do you think it influenced you the way it did?), they reiterated reasoning with its connection to particulars of practice, such as a specific skill set. This finding supports previous theorising where professional identity has, at its core, practice itself (Pierson et al., 2019). Most frequently, positive incidents tended to affirm the existing identity perception, followed by a growth prompt and/or discovery of some new facet.

Analysis of perceived reason for influence indicates negative incidents prompt discovery of some new facet and/or a growth prompt. The analysis also revealed a tendency for negative incidents to be more likely to undermine identity than to affirm it. This suggests a contradiction between the nature of influence of such incidents and the perceived reason for its influence. Contradiction, however, is a common feature of identity negotiations and perceptions (Lawler, 2014), yet this contradiction is more suggestive of the perception of such incidents over time, as respondents mainly discussed past incidents, oscillating between past and present perceptions. This finding similarly indicates ascribed meaning is subject to change over time, while being collocated with perceptions of dominant influences on professional identity.

Respondents indicated that the sentiment they ascribed to critical incidents tended to play a role in why the incidents influence identity. As linked to the above findings, this is further illustrated by the negotiation tendencies of incidents: positive incidents predominately tend to affirm existing professional identity while including prompts toward growth and/or discovery of identity; and negative incident are more associated with undermining of identity, while similarly including prompts toward discovery and/or growth of identity. However, the outcomes of negative incidents tended more frequently to be identity affirmation.

While it is present throughout, affect is suggested to be at its most influential at the beginning of identity negotiations prompted by an incident, thus acting as an entry point to identity negotiations. Affective response eventually gives way to discovery and/or growth of identity facets. The meaning ascribed to the incident by the respondent, collocated with their perceptions of dominant influences, will inform the outcome, as either undermining or affirming their perception of their professional identity. Both affective response and meaning ascribed, however, may change over time, prompting an additional iteration(s) of this process, as is illustrated by Respondent J1:

I mean it was horrible... I certainly didn't stand up to her on the outside, but I knew on the inside that she was wrong. I believed in myself. By that stage, I believed in myself strongly enough to know that what and how she saw me was not the real me, professionally or as a person. So yes, I got out of that situation because it'd be pretty silly to stay there. But I came out of it, I think stronger than...would've been. In fact, I look back on it now and I think 'gosh, that was the most wonderful thing that ever happened.'... In a sense, because I grew personally through it so much. I mean, I saw things in myself that I could improve on as a result and that was good. I'm sure I'm a better person for it now.

Note also that Respondent J1 alludes to their dominant influence. Respondent J1 reported their dominant influence on perception as *self perception*, which is further evidenced when they say, "I knew on the inside that she was wrong" and "By that stage, I believed in myself strongly enough to know that what and how she saw me was not the real me, professionally or as a person." Here they stress their perception of self, rooted in confidence, takes precedence, as they recognise that their perception and another's do not align and, overall, reject those of the other. Moreover, Respondent J1 reported that their dominant influence on their behaviour was *both bringing preexisting self and enacting a developed identity into professional identity*. In their statement above, they refer to this dominant influence twice. First, they say "I got out of that situation because it'd be pretty silly to stay there." They indicate that the situation was intolerable and therefore removed themselves from it, which alludes to their preexisting self, whether personally unable to tolerate such a situation or displaying a more avoidant tendency, as suggested by "I certainly didn't stand up to her on the outside." Second, in referring to *enacting a developed identity*, they state that due to this experience "I saw things in myself that I could improve on as a result and that was good. I'm sure I'm a better person for it now." An event in their professional life precipitated personal growth, from which their professional identity is predicated. Their meaning ascribed changed over time, upon reflection, identify negation and assimilation, as they first characterise this immediate experience of the incident as "I mean it was horrible" and rejecting the other person's perception, later stating "I look back on it now and I think 'gosh, that was the most wonderful thing that ever happened,'" and acknowledging areas of identity growth and being a "better person for it now."

6 Discussion

Respondent tendencies to rely on self perceptions alone or in combination with other factors underscores the primacy of self perception within professional identity development and resulting behaviour. Some respondent observations could be regarded as outliers. A small minority indicated, respectively, enacting a developed identity (e.g., Respondent P2's statement "Yeah, it's fulfilling a role or a need with skills.") and others' perceptions as more influential on identity development (e.g., Respondent C3's statement "I think it has been influenced more by the people that I work with... I think that what's developed and changed me"). These responses suggest, however, relational degree of affiliation with a collective professional identity. Professional identity results from self perception and the relation of a practitioner's self to a collective occupation, influencing behavioural and discursive actions (Sundin & Hedman, 2009). Individual relation or affiliation to the collective profession suggests that practitioner understanding of membership is by degree. Relational degree affiliation can be understood to refer to this dynamic. This finding indicates that while this minority occurrence may be found in practice, it is unlikely as a prevailing tendency, thus requiring further scrutiny.

It is further suggested that the dominant influence on an individual practitioner's perception will moderate the meaning ascribed to, and perception of, a critical incident, e.g., Respondent J1. As moderating aspects, these dominant influences are also suggested to have a key role in the subsequent negotiation process. This relationship is particularly supported by respondent understanding of influence on their perceptions. As the majority highlight their self perception as most influential, and the second largest representation emphasise their self perception in conjunction with others',

it is suggested that public library practitioners' own perceptions of critical incidents play an influential role in identity development. Embedded within this developmental process are negotiation processes that emphasise the importance of individual perception in identity, its development, and its subsequent effects on behaviour, as outlined by Respondents P1 ("I think I have tended to evolve the job to suit me and my interests and passions") and N2 ("I mean, some of it's myself, how I see myself. But a lot of it is probably the influence of mentors and people who have trained me and shown me what to do, and what their attitudes and behaviours have been"). When coupled with the tendency to increasingly personalise professional identity over time (Fraser-Arnott, 2017b), practitioner understandings of dominant influences on individual behaviour and perception play a key role in professional identity development. These influences, however, may be subject to change over time.

Results additionally indicate that critical incidents prompt a specific identity negotiation process, supporting and expanding on previous work (Duckett, 2001; Frye, 2018; Linton, 2016). Figure 1 outlines this process, read from left to right, here identified as the Critical Incident Negotiation Process. This figure outlines that when an incident occurs which meets an individual threshold for criticality, it will provoke an affective response which acts as an entry point to identity negotiations related to that incident. This response leads to discovery and/or growth of some facet of identity, for example validation. Discovery and/or growth of identity facets may or may not cooccur. This process results in an identity outcome as the respondent discerns whether these initial conclusions affirm or undermine their perception of their professional identity. Perception of and meaning ascribed to these incidents and their outcomes, however, may change over time. This change prompts an additional iteration(s), whose subsequent identity outcomes similarly affirm or undermine identity perception. Thus, this process can be understood to clarify the state of blurring relative to critical incidents, as theorised by Pierson et al. (2019).

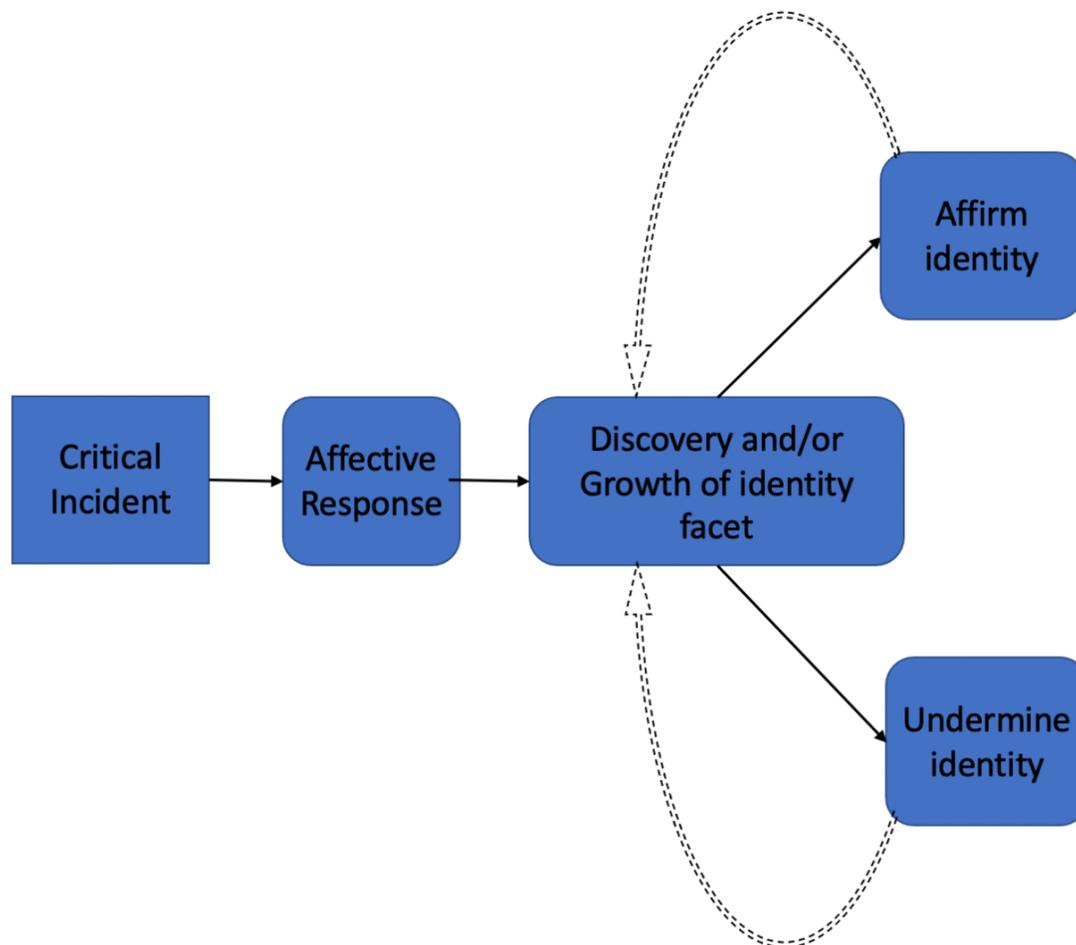


Figure 1: Critical Incident Negotiation Process.

Use of the critical incident technique allowed respondents to explore and reflect on significant experiences impacting their professional identity as public librarians. Classifying incidents provided in the questionnaire by sentiment afforded comparisons with those of an opposite (or similarly mixed) sentiment in interviews. Eliciting critical incidents in this way allowed for comparison of impact on identity based on sentiment. The second elicitation, for most respondents, also afforded exploration of the impact on identity of more than one incident, creating a robust dataset from which these findings are derived. Analytically extending the technique with the three, deeply probing questions allowed for insight beyond perhaps what the original technique could have yielded. These questions scrutinized the lasting effects of these incidents on respondent perception, behaviour, and integration into professional identity. For example, negative critical incidents, while more likely to prompt undermining of identity, are still more associated with identity affirmation. This finding may have been obscured if not for the addition of the three probing questions. Without employing the critical incident technique to: first, establish incidents of significance relative to professional identity; second, classify by sentiment; and third, “adapt[ing] to meet the specific situation at hand” (p. 335) with the second elicitation and three additional questions, understanding and articulation of the Critical Incident Negotiation Process would not have been possible.

Based on the fundamental concepts discussed above, three theoretical propositions are outlined relating to librarian professional identity and critical incident negotiations.

1. Proposition 1: The dominant influence on individual practitioner behaviour will influence professional behaviour.
2. Proposition 2: The dominant influence on individual practitioner perception will influence perception of the profession, practice, and the self within it.
3. Proposition 3: In most cases, practitioners will first rely on their own perceptions of their professional identity and its dominant influences to guide identity negotiations prompted by critical incidents.

7 Limitations and Future Research

Certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, transferability. This paper reports on responses to questions posed to public librarians in one country within a particular timeframe. Additionally, the Critical Incident Negotiation Process is a specific process, focusing on practitioner responses to critical incidents within the profession. Future research should investigate transferability and the applicability of the process to other prompts to identity negotiations. Additionally, theoretical propositions are offered relating to librarian professional identity and critical incident negotiations which are untested. Future research should test these propositions in other library, geographical, cultural, and temporal contexts.

8 Conclusion

This paper presented results from forty interviews with practicing public librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has presented findings related to dominant influences on practitioners’ understanding of behavioural and perception influences on professional identity development. Findings demonstrate that these perceptions impact identity development over time. Findings further report on the specific identity negotiation process prompted by critical incidents, the criticality of which is reliant on individual perception of the incident in relation to professional identity. This specific process is identified as the Critical Incident Negotiation Process. Finally, this paper offers three theoretical propositions relating to librarian professional identity.

This paper also outlines important future research. Namely, further investigation into the Critical Incident Negotiation Process and its wider applicability. Similarly, further investigation is needed on the three theoretical propositions concerning librarian professional identity negotiations. In discussions of the definition and fit of the librarian and the library in the communities and societies they serve, it is fundamental to consider and examine the role of librarian professional identity in these coconstructed relationships.

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