

## Corpus-based empirical approach to professionalism: Identifying interactional roles and dispositions in professional codes of ethics

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### Abstract

Although research on professional competence has adopted a number of approaches that have highlighted the importance of practice and values in enacting a professional identity, there is currently no established framework for empirical investigations. Based on a discourse analytic framework, this paper demonstrates how ethical codes in a number of consulting professions (law, accountancy and engineering/surveying) can be analyzed empirically by focusing on the collocation patterns found in the genre. The analysis will focus on how professionals are expected to behave in relation to two identity components in their ideal conducts of behavior: identity roles (or identity shifts) and identity virtues (positive attributes associated with a particular role). The engineering profession is found to have a fairly even representation of most of the identity roles identified: provider to client, unspecified/general, professional peer, employer and professional association. The legal profession places greater emphasis on the roles of provider to client and professional peer, whereas accountancy professionals tend to represent their identity roles more generally, although the role of provider to client remains an important category. With regard to identity virtues, i.e., the ideal dispositions or values displayed, all three professions highlight the primacy of professional standards or competence, with integrity and responsibility also emphasized by some.

**KEYWORDS:** CODES OF ETHICS; COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE; CORPUS ANALYSIS; IDENTITY ROLES; IDENTITY VIRTUES; PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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## 1 Introduction

In the face of increasingly specialized division of labor, many professionals are now expected to possess high levels of competence that are subject to public scrutiny for accountability and assessment and for education and training purposes. This paradigm shift is evidenced by the increasing use of such terms as ‘professionalism’, ‘best practice’ and ‘evidence-based practice’ in a wide array of professional services, which brings the quality of professional standards to the forefront. Many frameworks have been proposed for identifying the essential qualities that the practitioners of particular professions should possess, with emphasis on either individual attributes or more situated aspects of competence (for an overview, see Sarangi and Candlin 2011).

The *internal attributes-based approach* (sometimes called competency approach), which adopts an inductive methodology to professional competence, highlights the attributes required to perform a task successfully (Boyatzis 1982; Calhoun *et al.* 2008). However, while this approach may be more easily executed than others, in that it uses interviews and other techniques such as repertory grids (Lester 2014a), it tends to downplay the nuanced role of context, knowledge and power (Saks 2012). In contrast, the frameworks of *situated professional competence* (sometimes called competence approach) underscore the importance of contexts and adopt a deductive approach to dividing up professional roles into detailed descriptions of activity (Lave and Wenger 1991; Billett *et al.* 2014). The drawback is its more subjective nature and that it tends to lack an empirical basis. Both approaches have been criticized for being ‘unable to cope with the changing contexts, evolving practice and ethical demands of professional work’ (Lester 2014b: 31).

This paper mediates between the two approaches and proposes a discourse approach to identifying an important element of a profession: the set of values and dispositions expected of its practitioners when they communicate with clients, peers and the public. One study in the UK found that

The data indicates that professionalism has a basis in individual characteristics and values, but is also largely defined by context. Its definition varies with a number of factors, including organisational support, the workplace, the expectations of others, and the specifics of each service user / patient encounter. Regulations provide basic guidance and signposting on what is appropriate and what is unacceptable, but act as a baseline for behaviour, more than a specification.

(Health and Care Professions Council 2014: 3)

As such, a more objective method should be adopted to identify what constitutes professionalism. Although an increasing number of studies are dealing with the important issue of what constitutes communicative competence in professions from discourse perspectives (cf. Kramsch 2006), most of these focus

on such competence in the linguistic, paralinguistic and cultural arenas (Bhatia and Bremner 2014), with insufficient attention paid to the subtler aspects of a profession, such as the values, virtues or dispositions expected and, most importantly, how they are displayed in communication (Tai 2016; see, however, Sarangi 2018 on communicative expertise which goes beyond language).

Research investigating the distribution of attributes and values across professions is therefore timely, as different professions are likely to highlight different attributes and values when dealing with different audiences. Among professional values, virtues or dispositions essential for communicating with different audiences, identity constitutes the core of communication. The present project seeks to fill the aforementioned research gap by investigating two aspects of identity: identity roles, also known as interactional roles, and identity virtues, also called dispositions (Kong 2014). This paper, which reports the first stage of our project on workplace communication competence, examines the identity roles and identity virtues displayed in the code of ethics of three professions, namely law, accountancy and engineering/surveying, to prepare the way for the development of a framework for identifying the salient features in actual professional discourse for comparison and training purposes.

In what follows, we begin with a literature review. Then the corpus methodology of this study is spelt out. The most frequently occurring items across the three codes of ethics, such as ‘Members shall...’ ‘Accountants shall...’, etc., are then examined to identify the major textual patterns expressing identity roles and identity virtues. The concordance lines of co-occurring items are then carefully studied to determine the implications of the most salient identity roles and identity virtues in the three professions examined. We conclude with a summary of our findings and suggest some implications.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Professionalism and situated professional competence

Professionalism is a popular notion, as professionals of any kind are now expected to be accountable to the public (Weckert and Lucas 2013), but the term ‘professionalism’ itself is ‘a contested set of practices where boundaries are continuously being redefined and revolving in response to socioeconomic and cultural pressures’ (Malin 2000). One easier way of conceiving professionalism is to examine what a professional needs to learn or know if he or she is to be deemed competent. Although the notion of professional competence is a more transparent term than professionalism, it has been seen unproblematically as the simple possession of specialized knowledge and expertise acquired through years of training. This fails to acknowledge many other important aspects, such as communication in real situations (Klemp 1977; Boyatzis 1982; Sarangi 2018).

Following Epstein and Hundert (2002: 226), we view professional competence more broadly as ‘the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served.’ This definition is underpinned by seven dimensions of professional competence: the *cognitive* dimension (e.g., core knowledge of the profession), the *technical* dimension (e.g., procedural skills), the *integrative* dimension (e.g., incorporating cognitive and practical judgment), the *context* (e.g., use of time), *relationships* (e.g., communication skills with clients and peers), the *affective* dimension (e.g., tolerance of anxiety, respect for clients) and *habits of mind* (e.g., willingness to acknowledge and correct errors). Obviously, however, different professions are concerned with these various dimensions to differing degrees.

In a study of the websites of 264 professional associations in Hong Kong, only two were found explicitly to refer to the communicative competence requirements expected of members or staff (Cheng 2009). Further, only 20% of the websites were found to contain information on, or imply the need for, such competence in their codes of ethics/guidelines for practice and continuing professional development sections. The communicative aspects of being a professional may attract the attention of applied linguists, but most studies in applied linguistics were restricted to the linguistic or at best paralinguistic dimensions of such competence (cf. Bhatia and Bremner 2014). An informed understanding of professional competence can be obtained by considering it from the perspective of treating professionalism as an organic social practice rather than just a set of pre-determined linguistic features.

As argued by Sarangi and Candlin (2010: 7), ‘a practice-focused applied linguistics [...] offers very considerable opportunities for collaborative, and other- and self-focused exploration of key themes of [professional communication]’ (see also Sarangi 2005). The call for a more prominent role of applied linguistics in understanding a profession as a practice actually echoes the growing consensus in some applied linguistics research of communicative competence, where the notion is problematized, re-examined and redefined in light of societal changes and consequent changes in what constitutes successful communication (Celce-Murcia 2008). In the following, we review the relationship between language and identity, and then propose a corpus-based empirical framework for studying situated identities in professional discourse.

## 2.2 Identity roles and identity virtues

Rather than viewing language as the result of one’s identity, we view identity as both the cause and result of language. Language has traditionally been seen as a reflection of one’s identity; that is, one speaks or writes in a certain way as a result of his or her identity. This view has recently been challenged by the social

constructionist paradigm, which posits that language and identity mutually shape each other rather than the former being simply a reflection of the latter.

Despite the paradigm shift in appreciating the complex nature of the relationship between language and identity, the terms associated with identity such as self, role and status have sometimes been used interchangeably, causing confusion and difficulties for empirical comparison (Sarangi 2010). In this paper, the concept of identity role draws on Goffman's idea of *footing* (Goffman 1981), while that of identity virtues is connected to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991). The former is the alignment or stance taken in an interaction 'as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance' (Goffman 1981: 128); this awareness of 'otherness' is an important but often neglected aspect of identity and has been associated with other important notions such as a patient-centered approach in healthcare (Sarangi 2007). *Habitus*, meanwhile, refers both the self that is conditioned by norms and the self that structures norms – i.e. the disposition or tendency to act in a certain manner.

Identity roles and identity virtues both change in accordance with context: for example, when playing the role of rule-maker, a manager has to demonstrate the virtue of impartiality, but when playing the role of facilitator, in contrast, he or she has to highlight the virtues of understanding. However, while roles are situated in shifts and changes in affiliation or alignments with participants in interaction, virtues are enactments of interlocutors' inherent values. As such, the latter are more flexible and subject to individual interpretation: for example, a manager can choose to be a more accountable or a more coercive leader. By the same token, he or she can be more lenient, strict or polite, depending on the management style he or she believes in and the personal attributes he or she has.

What we would like to emphasize here is that there is no one-to-one matching relationship between roles and virtues, and that identity virtues change in accordance with one's interactional roles with others. As suggested by Sarangi (2010), the relationship between the two can be better understood in terms of the relationship between figure and ground in Gestalt psychology. More details are given in Section 3 below as to how those roles and virtues were analyzed in this study.

### 2.3 Codes of ethics and professional discourse categories

Ethical codes are an important genre in professional socialization, regulation and training. Embodying an overlapping relationship with some important notions such as professionalism / professional competence, codes of ethics or practice are characterized primarily by their normative function in shaping or forming the given profession, and this is the reason why they fall into the cat-

egory of regulatory discourse. However, although there are linguistic studies investigating the genre, primarily focusing on organizational structures, and move structures in particular (Kong 2014), not enough attention has been applied to codes of practice from discourse perspectives; an exception here is Hogben and Boddington's (2006) work in healthcare contexts.

Further, a code of ethics, as an occluded genre (Swales 2004), can reveal much about not only how the behavior of a professional is regulated, but also what behavior is perceived as ideal. It will be argued in this paper that ethical codes, as well as revealing the ethical competence of a professional, can also be used as valuable data sources to understand professional competence in general.

The ethical codes of many professional bodies share similarities. A typical example from the UK is that of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, which identifies five standards to which its members must adhere:

- Act with integrity;
- Always provide a high standard of service;
- Act in a way that promotes trust in the profession;
- Treat others with respect;
- Take responsibility.

However, there may also be important attributes that are specific to particular professions (Bennion 1969), and some of these are discussed in greater detail below. In what follows, we demonstrate that codes of ethics provide an accessible, and yet crucial, site of investigation into the complex interaction of identity roles and identity virtues within a profession, thus adding to the linguistic understanding of how codes of ethics do their job through their ideologies, cultivation or discouragement of certain types of behavior and virtues, and display of multiple identity roles or different relationships with an audience.

As our study has the primary aim of comparing identity roles and identity virtues in different professions, research into the classification of professions may yield insights. The literature here is very limited, although a useful distinction has been made by Bayles (2010 [1981]: 10) between scholarly professions, where a professional 'usually works for a salary rather than as an entrepreneur who depends on attracting individual clients' and consulting professionals who 'traditionally practice[s] on a fee-for-service basis with a personal, individual relationship [with the] client'.

Consulting professions are characterized by (1) the perceived importance of their services to society, (2) the monopolistic provision of their professional practices and (3) the self-regulation of their professional members. Three examples provided by Bayles are engineers, lawyers and accountants. As regards the first characteristic, these professionals all provide services crucial to the functioning of society:

Consulting engineers [...] design the structures and facilities essential to modern life [...]. The legal profession provides services essential for justice and equality before the law [...]. Accountants, as auditors, testify to the financial integrity of institutions and keep track of the wealth in society.

(Bayles 2010 [1981]: 11)

Their monopoly of provision is based on the requirement that only those who have qualified are legally permitted to practice; this gives enormous power to the association that represents the interests of the profession, because ‘professionals do not have a right to practice; it is a privilege conferred by the state’ (Bayles 2010 [1981]: 11). However, at the same time, consulting professions are ‘self-regulated and are not subject to too much public control’ (Bayles 2010 [1981]: 11).

However, although the distinction between consulting and scholarly professions is useful in delineating some of the differences among professions, it is too simplistic to assume that all professions that fall into one or the other category are necessarily similar to one another. The distinctions are also sometimes blurred – after all, professions evolve their own ideologies, patterns of socialization and discourse practices. In this paper, we focus on how these three types of consulting professionals construct identity roles and identity virtues *vis-à-vis* their professional codes of practice.

### 3 Methodology

Corpus-based empirical analysis is the main analytic approach applied to our data. Ethical codes fit into what Scollon (2008) identifies as ‘discourse in collision’, where participants of different interests have to participate in negotiation. As our research aim is to identify the identity roles and identity virtues subtly manifested in the codes of ethics of three professions, the corpus-based empirical analysis is applied to the understanding of professional competence and professionalism. This empirical basis, lacking in many studies conceptualizing professionalism, can shed light on a more inductive or bottom-up approach in identifying generic and specific professional attributes for research and pedagogical purposes.

Our data come from six regulatory policy manuals collected between March and June 2015 that represent three broad professional categories: as discussed above, these are engineering/surveying, law and accountancy. The manuals derive from the following institutions: the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), the Hong Kong Bar Association (HKBA), the Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants (HKICPA), the Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors (HKIS), the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers (HKIE) and the Hong Kong Law Society (HKLS). All the manuals were originally written in English, and engineering and surveying were treated as a combined profession due to their close association with the same aspects of science and technology.



The six manuals, all downloadable from the professional organizations’ websites, are official documents stipulating (1) the main duties of members of the profession. (2) expectations as to behavior in carrying out the duties of the profession and (3) the kinds of behavior that are prohibited in carrying out those duties. Table 1 summarizes the professional domains, the sub-corpora from which the data are drawn, and the number of words in each sub-corpus.

**Table 1:** Information on the corpus used in this study

| Domain                | Sub-corpus                  | Number (%) of words |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Engineering/Surveying | Engineers (HKIE)            | 1375 (0.33%)        |
|                       | Surveyors (HKIS)            | 3521 (0.84%)        |
| Law                   | Solicitors (HKLS)           | 67,169 (16%)        |
|                       | Barristers (HKBA)           | 43,950 (10.46%)     |
| Accounting            | General Accountants (ACCA)  | 212,528 (50.57%)    |
|                       | Public Accountants (HKICPA) | 91,740 (21.83%)     |
| Total                 |                             | 420,283 (100%)      |

Although most data were collected from professional associations in Hong Kong, cultural variation is not the focus of this paper. In fact, the regulatory models of professionals of Hong Kong, as an international trade city, are identical to those of the UK or USA.

To identify and compare the identity roles and identity virtues in the three professions, the following steps were adopted. First, each of the code of ethics sub-corpora was examined by *ConcGram* (Greaves 2009) to determine the most frequently occurring words. Second, out of the high-frequency words identified, the words associated with identity roles and identity virtues were selected. Third, the frequently co-occurring words were selected, and the concordance lines were examined in order to identify pairs of words expressing identity roles and identity virtues for further analysis.

**Analytic Procedures**

The following are examples of the concordance lines of co-occurring words in the sub-corpora of the codes of ethics:

*A member of the Institution shall order his conduct so as to uphold the dignity, standing and reputation of the Profession.*

(HKIE)

*A Member of the Institute shall discharge his duties to his client with integrity and in accordance with the highest standard of business ethics.*

(HKIS)



The solicitor *should exercise* his judgment whether to give reasons for his decision.  
(HKLS)

Notwithstanding that instructions have been delivered to a barrister, the *barrister shall* not be deemed to have accepted those instructions until he has had a reasonable opportunity to peruse them and decide whether they are appropriate for Professional Direct Access.  
(HKBA)

Any information supplied by the existing *accountant shall* be considered carefully by the proposed accountant before deciding to accept or reject the appointment.  
(ACCA)

Upon becoming aware of this, the professional *accountant* in business *shall* take steps to be disassociated from that information.  
(HKICPA)

As can be seen from the above examples, the two co-occurring words identified by *ConcGram* are not necessarily immediately adjacent; instead, there is a gap of up to three words between them. Not all of the concordances generated were used in the data analysis, as some concerned entitlements (e.g., a *Member* who is an employed barrister *shall* not be entitled to vote on...) instead of the responsibilities/obligations that are the current focus. The number of relevant concordances generated by *ConcGram* is listed in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Co-occurring words in sub-corpora examined

| Domain                    | Sub-corpus                  | Co-occurring words          | Number (%) of relevant concordance lines |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Engineering/<br>Surveying | Engineers (HKIE)            | <i>member and shall</i>     | 37 (5.6%)                                |
|                           | Surveyors (HKIS)            | <i>member and shall</i>     | 35 (5.3%)                                |
| Law                       | Solicitors (HKLS)           | <i>solicitor and should</i> | 147 (22.2%)                              |
|                           | Barristers (HKBS)           | <i>barrister and shall</i>  | 62 (9.4%)                                |
| Accounting                | General Accountants (ACCA)  | <i>accountant and shall</i> | 271 (41%)                                |
|                           | Public Accountants (HKICPA) | <i>accountant and shall</i> | 109 (16.5%)                              |
| Total                     |                             |                             | 661 (100%)                               |

After the concordance lines containing the co-occurring words had been identified, they were analyzed according to identity roles and identity virtues. However, before the numerical analysis, all the concordance lines were closely read by a research colleague and one of us, in order to first identify what the potential identity roles and identity virtues actually were. In some cases, it is explicit whether the identity roles relate to dealings with clients or the general public, but in some cases an inference had to be drawn from the context. In cases where there is no special mention of any relationship and where no

inference can be drawn, it was coded as 'General'. The various identity virtues are based on the five professional attributes of Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors as discussed above, supplemented by what Riley (2007) proposed as 'communicative virtues' and two existing professional ethics frameworks (Bennion 1969; Martin *et al.* 2010). Four potentially overlapping virtues were also clarified and defined before any coding:

- *Professional competence / maintaining professional standards*: use of professional knowledge and expertise in judgements, decision making and execution of tasks so as to maintain the standard of a profession or the organization in question;
- *Integrity or fairness*: proper and ethical conduct or behavior of a professional in relation to bribery, confidential information and being 'open and transparent' (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2019);
- *Honesty*: accurate rendering and reporting of facts and figures;
- *Responsibility*: awareness of the boundaries and limitations of a profession especially in relation to relations with other professions.

Particular attention should be paid to the subtle distinction among some of these attributes. For example, professional competence here refers strictly to the deployment of professional knowledge in the day-to-day execution of activities, and to distinguish this from its more general sense we instead refer to maintaining professional standards. Integrity and honesty also have overlapping meanings in a general sense, and so in this paper, integrity refers to the upholding of ethical principles, especially in cases where conflict of interest may arise, while honesty refers to the accurate rendering and reporting of information, whether or not there is a conflict of interest. In this paper, responsibility is interpreted more narrowly and refers to a professional's sense of awareness of gray areas in practice and of a profession's boundaries in relation to other professions (See Solin and Östman 2015 for a discourse approach to responsibility).

After the definition of attributes had been completed, the concordances were classified according to different categories. Although identity virtues can be identified in discrete terms, there can also be overlaps and at times even conflicts in some of the virtues. For example, in a recent study of how a social worker's identity is co-constructed (Weinberg 2014), the value of being ethical (integrity) can be in conflict with another important value, of promoting self-care among clients. Also in the field of social work, the roles of gatekeeper in assessing eligibility for benefits and that of supporter/helper have to be carefully balanced in social worker-client interactions (Hall *et al.* 2006). As we will see, the balancing of such contradictory aspects in professional ethical decision also applies to the professions under study here.

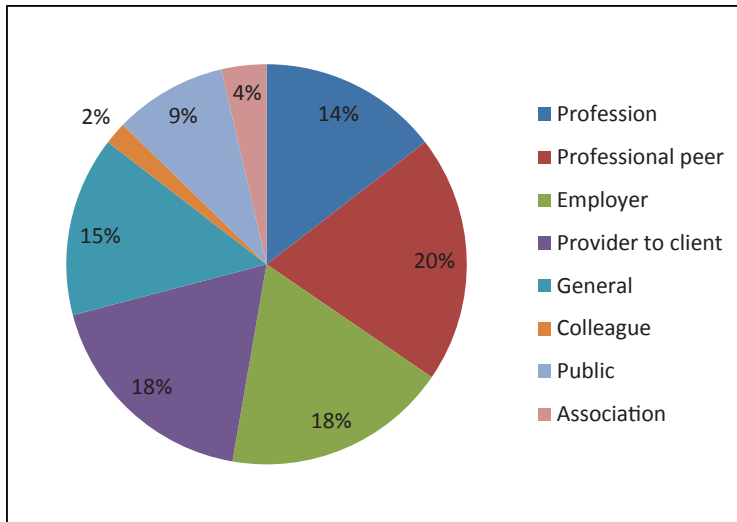
## 4 Findings and discussion

In the following subsections, each profession is discussed in turn, and the three professions compared in relation to their manifestation of identity roles and identity virtues.

### 4.1 Engineering/Surveying

#### 4.1.1 Identity roles

Figure 1 shows the relative frequency of the various identity roles in the concordance lines relating to the engineering/surveying sector.



**Figure 1:** Identity roles involved in the engineering/surveying profession

As shown, the various audiences are rather evenly distributed, particularly when compared with the two other professions. However, the two most significant roles in the relevant concordance lines are provider to client (21%) and general (18%). A plausible explanation for this finding is that many engineers and surveyors are involved in project-based jobs that require them to engage in discussions, negotiations and planning with various clients to reach agreements. Owing to the opportunities to contact a range of clients, the role of the provider to client is particularly significant in the engineering/surveying profession, as the following excerpts show.

[In pursuance of this rule a member shall, inter alia:] not accept any financial or contractual obligation on behalf of his employer or *client* without their authority.

(HKIE)

[A Member shall, amongst other things:] not disclose any confidential information in relation to a *client* to anyone without the written consent of the *client* concerned  
(HKIS)

With regard to the general role, the focus is more on generic behavior, lacking a specific participant, as shown below:

[In pursuance of this rule a member shall, inter alia:] not undertake responsibility which he himself is not qualified and competent to discharge.  
(HKIE)

[A Member shall, amongst other things:] not accept any instruction which he is not qualified or competent to discharge.  
(HKIS)

The foregoing codes from engineering/surveying regulatory bodies do not seem to indicate any target audience. Instead, they focus on such professional ethics as *responsibility* and *reliability*, as well as other professional attitudes that will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. While having no clearly defined audience may facilitate broader inclusion and reference, there is a significant drawback, where the lack of a clear audience may dilute the sense of accountability and responsibility a professional may hold towards their clients.

The relationship of the professional *vis-à-vis* the profession itself is also an important identity role for engineers and surveyors (16%), as shown in Figure 1. This role is revealed in the following examples.

Rule 1 – Responsibility to the Profession: A member of the Institution shall order his conduct so as to uphold the dignity, standing and reputation of the *Profession*.  
(HKIE)

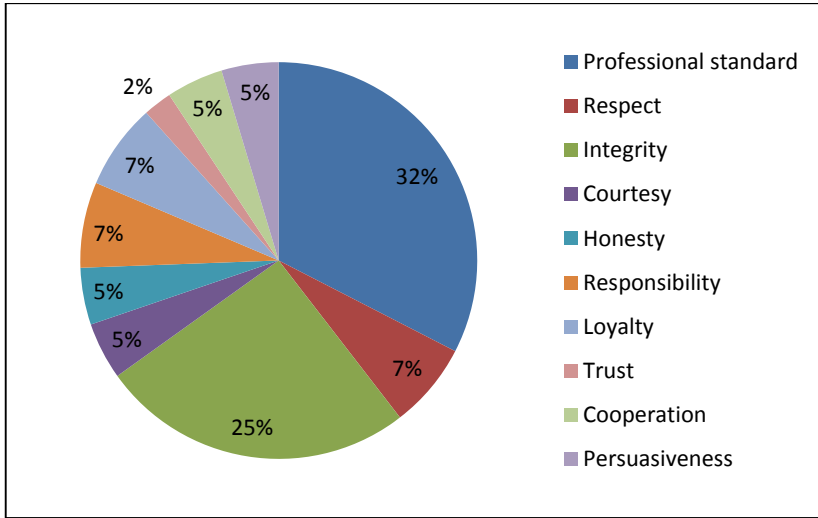
[A Member shall, amongst other things:] not carry on practice as a surveyor under any such name, style or title as to prejudice the reputation of the Institute or the surveying *profession*.  
(HKIS)

As discussed in the literature review section, one of the key characteristics of a consulting profession is the self-regulating mechanism. As a gatekeeper, a chartering organization no doubt attaches significance to its role of maintaining the reputation and integrity of the profession and avoiding any inappropriate acts that may damage its reputation.

Professional peers come fourth (15%) in the representation of identity roles in engineering/surveying. Employers and the professional association have the same degree of representation (11%) in the codes of ethics examined. Other roles, such as the public and colleagues, are relatively less prominent (6% or even less) in this profession.

#### 4.1.2 Identity virtues

Figure 2 shows relative frequency of the various identity virtues in the concordance lines relating to the engineering/surveying sector.



**Figure 2:** Identity virtues involved in engineering/surveying

Maintaining professional standards and integrity are the two most important identity virtues in engineering/surveying (32% each). In fact, the virtue of maintaining professional standards is equally emphasized among the three professions examined in this paper, which is to some extent to be expected, as one of the major roles of a professional body is to regulate the practice of its professional members:

[In pursuance of this rule a member *shall*, inter alia:] *advise* his employer or client in anticipating the possible consequences of relevant developments that come to his knowledge.

(HKIE)

[A Member *shall*, amongst other things:] *not maliciously or falsely injure nor attempt to injure* the professional reputation or practice of other Members.

(HKIS)

These excerpts instruct the members on ways to behave professionally and not to violate certain rules. For example, engineers should avoid any damage to the environment and should advise their clients or employers using their professional knowledge, whereas surveyors should not behave in a disrespectful or impolite manner that might bring disrepute to the profession.

Accounting for 32% of all occurrences of identity virtues, the virtue of integrity, in this paper specifically meaning being ethical, seems to be a more

important issue to address for engineering/surveying than other professions, as contracting and sub-contracting are very common practices that can be subject to bribes:

Responsibility to Employers or Clients: A *member* of the Institution *shall* discharge his duties to his employer or client with integrity and in accordance with the highest standards of business ethics.

(HKIE)

[A *Member shall*, amongst other things:] not exert, directly or indirectly, undue pressure or influence on any person for the purpose of securing instructions for work.

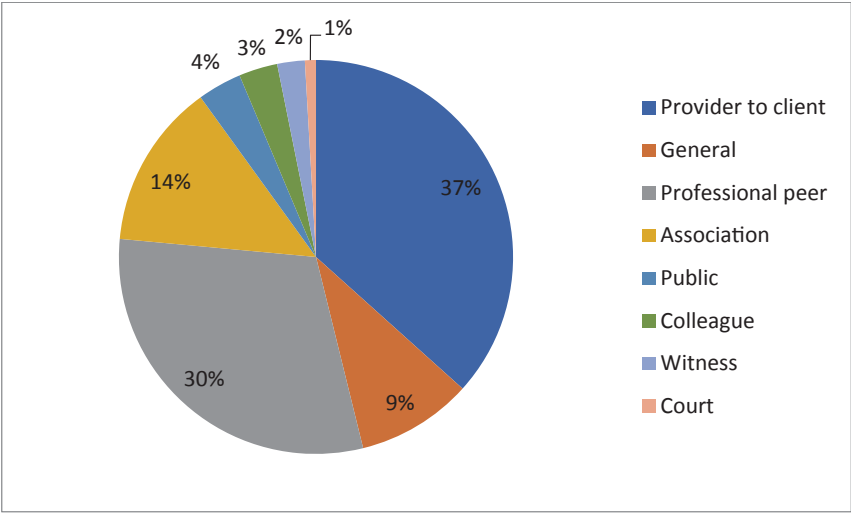
(HKIS)

The foregoing instances obviously place emphasis on members’ integrity by instructing them to reject such unprofessional behavior as receiving advantages from third parties, disclosing confidential information and exerting undue pressure on others in order to gain benefits. The fact that both the virtue of professional standards and integrity are valued in the construction industry highlights engineers’ understanding of ‘professional responsibility not only as liability for blame but in a capacious sense as stewardship for society’ (Loui 2005: 383).

4.2 Law

4.2.1 Identity roles

Figure 3 shows relative frequency of the various identity roles in the concordance lines relating to the legal profession.



**Figure 3:** Identity roles involved in the legal profession

Unlike engineers and surveyors, many lawyers spend most of their time working with individual clients, although there are also in-house lawyers who predominately take care of the interests of a single firm/corporation, involving themselves in such matters as litigation, prosecution and defense. Having a general identity role only as minor participant representation, provider to client, as a participant category, constitute more than one third of the total roles (37%), as shown in the following excerpts:

If one of the *clients* is a person with whom the solicitor has a continuing relationship and for whom the solicitor acts regularly, this fact should be revealed to the other at the outset with a recommendation that both.

(HKLS)

The solicitor should also consider whether the *client's* liability for costs may be covered by insurance.

(HKLS)

Professional peer is another important identity role (30%, the second-most frequent), demonstrating the particular importance of collegiality and cooperation for lawyers. Also, in Hong Kong, barristers are referred to clients by solicitors in the same way that specialists are referred to by general practitioners in the medical realm. Hence, references to communication between professional peers are common in this sub-corpus:

A barrister shall inform the *instructing officer* immediately [if] there is an appreciable risk that he may not be able to undertake a brief which he has accepted.

(HKBA)

A *solicitor acting jointly* for 'related' parties should make reasonable enquiries as to their relationship.

(HKLS)

A solicitor should not seek to pass on to the solicitor on the other side confidential information which he does not wish to be disclosed to the *other solicitor's* client.

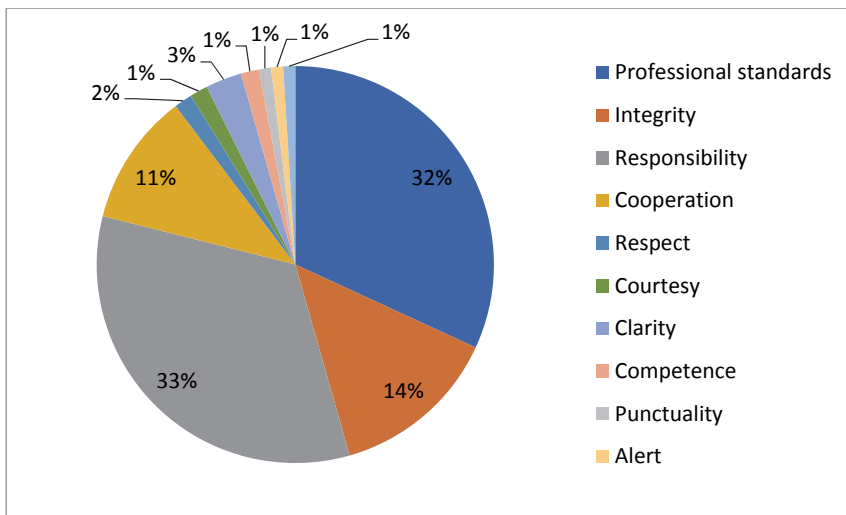
(HKLS)

#### 4.2.2 Identity virtues

Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of the various identity virtues in the concordance lines relating to the legal profession.

As shown, responsibility (33%) and professional standards (32%) are the most frequently emphasized identity virtues in the legal realm. Compared with other professions, it is more common for lawyers to deal with clients individually and to deal with lawyers from other firms. These professional-lay and interprofessional relationships are the basis of a strong sense of responsibility a legal professional body attempts to cultivate:





**Figure 4:** Identity virtues involved in the legal profession

In the case of instructions other than a brief it is a matter for agreement between the instructing member and the barrister or his clerk or secretary whether the fee *shall be agreed* before the instructions are accepted or at any later date.

(HKBA)

Where a warrant permits a police officer or other authority to seize confidential documents a solicitor *should comply* with the terms of the warrant.

(HKLS)

These codes clearly lay out the responsibilities or boundaries a legal professional should be aware of. They cover matters ranging from cooperation with colleagues and peers to the individual obligations of a legal professional; for instance, agreements on related payments, the acceptance of cases and the reporting of any breaches of an undertaking.

The following rules illustrate how legal professionals should act with regard to the virtue of professional standards:

An attesting solicitor *should* identify a signatory to a document executed outside Hong Kong in the same manner as if the document were executed in Hong Kong.

(HKLS)

A barrister *shall not* without leave of the Bar Council *provide or publish* a photograph of himself in wig and/or gown for the purpose of practice promotion.

(HKBA)

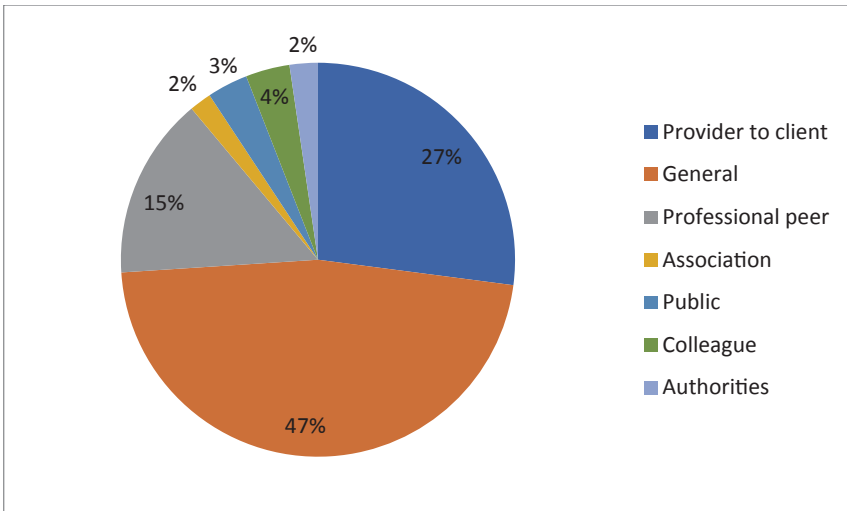
Legal professionals are advised not to violate the foregoing rules or regulations in their professional conduct. Otherwise, they may be punished in accordance with the ordinance that applies. Barristers are also instructed not to publish

photographs of themselves in a wig or gown to promote anything that could tarnish the image of the profession. In addition, in daily practice, solicitors should include their names on any instructions or covering letters so that they can be identified. These examples show the importance of maintaining professional standards in the legal profession.

### 4.3 Accountancy

#### 4.3.1 Identity roles

Figure 5 shows the relative frequency of the various identity roles in the concordance lines relating to the accountancy profession.



**Figure 5:** Identity roles involved in accountancy profession

As shown, the ‘general’ role is invoked most frequently by accountants. Nearly half (47%) of the identity role performances observed in the profession are generic or do not specifically mention a target audience, as shown in the following excerpts from the codes of ethics of the HKCPA and ACCA:

A professional accountant in public practice shall evaluate the significance of any threats and apply safeguards when necessary to eliminate them or reduce them to an acceptable level.

(HKCPA)

A professional accountant in public practice shall also take all reasonable steps to resolve speedily any dispute which arises.

(ACCA)

The more diverse identity roles coincide with a more diverse range of attributes related to accountants’ attitudes, such as integrity, rationality and justice, which underscore their work instead of the roles they assume in the process of their work. For example, they have to consider safety in public practice, diminish the likelihood of conflicts of interest, comply with related codes and act reasonably, as discussed below.

The provider to client role (27%) is also highlighted in accountancy, as most accountants have many clients at the same time:

Before accepting a specific *client* engagement, a professional accountant in public practice shall determine whether acceptance would create any threats to compliance with the fundamental principles.

(ACCA)

A professional accountant shall dissociate himself [or] herself from any returns or accounts that may be affected by a *client’s* concealment.

(ACCA)

The foregoing examples mention several client-related issues in professional accountancy practice, including the safeguarding of clients’ confidential information, the avoidance of conflicts of interest with clients and the protection of clients’ rights.

4.3.2 Identity virtues

Figure 6 below shows the relative frequency of the various identity virtues in the concordance lines relating to the accountancy profession.

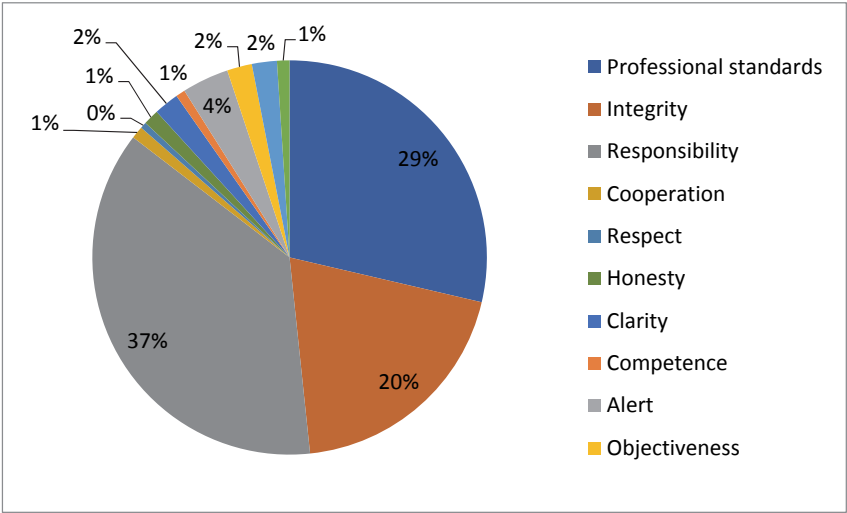


Figure 6: Identity virtues involved in accountancy profession

Similar to the legal profession, of the various identity virtues identified, the accounting profession places the greatest emphasis on responsibility (37% of the relevant concordance lines). Not only do accountants bear responsibility for the companies to which they belong, they also bear responsibility for their clients and the professional field as a whole, as illustrated in the following:

When a professional accountant becomes aware that the accountant has been associated with such information, the accountant *shall take steps* to be disassociated from that information.

(HKCPA)

Where appropriate, a professional accountant *shall make* clients, employers or other users of the accountant's professional services *aware* of the limitations inherent in the services.

(ACCA)

Such acts, from dissociating oneself from information in relation to other accountants, to clearly asserting one's professional territory and limitations, set the boundaries of a professional accountant. This may be due to the more fluid nature of accountants, who always have to work with other professionals in execution of their duties.

Maintaining professional standards, which rank second, account for 29% of the identity virtue concordance lines identified in the accounting field. Similar to the case in the legal and engineering/surveying professions, being competent as an accountant mainly relates to the successful maintenance of the professional reputation of accountancy as a collectivity, as illustrated by the following codes:

A professional accountant *shall take qualitative as well as quantitative factors* into account when evaluating the significance of a threat.

(HKCPA)

A professional accountant *shall not perform a professional service* if a circumstance or relationship biases or unduly influences the accountant's professional judgment with respect to that service.

(ACCA)

The foregoing codes make it clear that to maintain professional standards, accountants must engage in critical and rational thinking to weigh up the consequences of various actions, including a consideration of potential threats and risks. The emphasis again is on the importance of demonstrating professional standards as a collective group in dealing with the public.

The virtue of integrity is also important in the accounting field, ranking third-most frequent (20%) among the identify virtues identified, most likely because accountants deal with highly confidential financial information on a

regular basis. Clients thus expect them to behave with integrity. This virtue is exemplified in the following excerpts.

If, after exhausting all relevant possibilities, the ethical conflict remains unresolved, a professional accountant *shall, where possible, refuse to remain associated* with the matter creating the conflict.

(HKCPA)

A professional accountant *shall not retain insolvency monies* in a general client account.

(ACCA)

A professional accountant *shall not withhold due payment out of monies* to clients for the sole reason that a dispute exists in relation to fees.

(ACCA)

These examples demonstrate two factors that may challenge an accountant's integrity – conflicts of interest and the handling of money. The field's codes of ethics stipulate that accountants must avoid conflicts of interest and should not retain clients' monies. Circumventing potential controversies seems to be the major mechanism of displaying the virtue of integrity in the accounting field.

## 5 Summary of findings, conclusions and implications

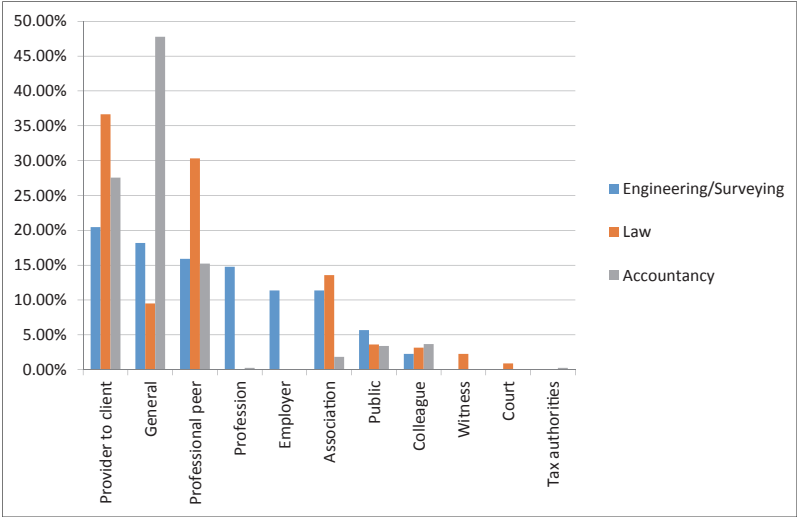
Although ethics codes are important documents for professional socialization and training/assessment purposes, their relationship with notions such as professionalism and professional competence is yet to be fully explored. It has been argued in this paper that ethics codes, which are obviously invested with interests of different parties, can provide a very useful angle to examine how professional competence can be analyzed and conceptualized. This study has also shed light on the contribution of corpus-based empirical analysis in professional communication research.

Although professionals are usually perceived by the public as a homogeneous group of institutional workers with the same expectations, our findings have clearly demonstrated potential similarities and differences concerning what constitutes the audiences that different professionals have to deal with and the corresponding desired values they are expected to display.

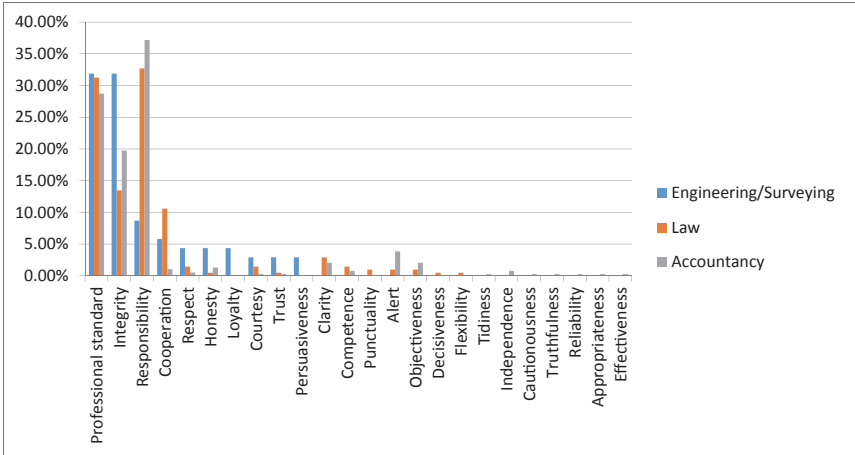
As regards identity roles, engineering seems to be the profession with the most even distribution in its codes, although the roles of provider to client and general/unspecified are slightly more significantly represented than others. In law, the dominant focus is on clients and professional peers because of the specific nature of barristers in Hong Kong, where solicitors act as middlemen in seeking their services. Accountancy displays a similar pattern as that of legal professionals, with clients and professional peers constituting the most important audiences for professional accountants. Nevertheless, their codes

of ethics also display a more important representation of a general identity role, which also coincides with the more diverse range of identity virtues that accountants are expected to uphold in carrying out their work (see Figure 7).

As far as identity virtues are concerned, law and accountancy are more similar, which is not surprising given some similarities in the nature of their work, whereas engineering/surveying is an outlier. Law and accountancy professions both consider responsibility to be a priority, followed closely by professional standards (see Figure 8). In contrast, maintaining professional



**Figure 7:** Comparison of identity roles among the three professions



**Figure 8:** Comparison of identity virtues among the three professions

standards and integrity are most frequently invoked in engineering/surveying, although, similar to identity roles, the profession also has a more even distribution of virtues than the other two.

The similar emphasis on professional standards across the three professions, and on responsibility in law and accountancy, is not surprising, because the three professions all fall into the category of ‘consulting professions’ (Bayles 2010 [1981]). It is important for the associations that regulate their members’ behavior to regard professional standards as of paramount importance. While this finding may not be surprising, it is interesting that all regulating bodies speak to their members as a collective group, not as individuals, emphasizing the importance of upholding the image of the organization and hence the profession. This emphasis on collective membership underscores the role of expertise and knowledge in the socially contested construction of a profession and its member: ‘occupational groups gain and/or maintain professional standing based on the creation of legal boundaries that mark out the position of specific occupational groups. Professionalization in this sense is centered on attaining a particular form of formal legal regulation with registers creating bodies of insiders and excluding outsiders’ (Saks 2012: 4).

The predominant focus on professionals’ identity as a collectivity may have implications on the mentality and behavior of professionals who may not regard their behavior as the result of their own responsibility, posing an interesting contrast to some professions such as healthcare, where practitioners are increasingly pushed to take individual responsibility when taking care of their clients. Long term, the question of how this may affect the ethical decision making of a professional should be addressed in future research. Meanwhile, the particular focus on integrity as an ideal disposition in engineering/surveying is likely the result of the prevalence of sub-contracting practices, which are more prone to bribery and other types of dishonest behavior.

The findings presented herein are also of significance to educators responsible for imparting professional values and virtues, as stated explicitly in a research report on professionalism in healthcare professions:

[I]f professionalism is a reflection of a set of core beliefs or attitudes, rather than knowledge-based competency, there are implications for how professionalism is taught or developed in training.

(Health and Care Professions Council 2014: 33)

We can add that in multilingual contexts such as Hong Kong, this also has implications for language teachers who teach professionals how to communicate.

However, the findings do need to be validated and followed up by more research, particularly textual analyses of the professional documents of each profession and interviews with practitioners to verify the views presented, as



‘the publication of ethical statements is only the most visible element of creating an infrastructure to support ethical practice’ (Bond 2005: 7). A professional may not enact exactly what is prescribed.

Methodologically, this paper has demonstrated what Sarangi and Candlin (2010) have argued as being interprofessional work by focusing on both applied linguistics (particularly discourse and corpus analysis) and professional practice. This paper, which reports the pilot stage of a larger project, helps us to view professional identities through the ways they mediate between roles and virtues in professional discourse. The current paradigm of communicative competence in applied linguistics is dominated by the idea that it can be treated as a discrete entity that can be acquired and analyzed. The findings in this paper have underscored the complex and situated interplay of different dimensions across different professions; as Boreham (2011: 264) argues, ‘considerations of competence must take into account the complex interactions between the individual and the people and objects with which he/she interacts in the workplace itself.’ Although identity has been identified as a potential thread for linking isolated dimensions of communicative competence, one problem is that identity means different things to different people. Identity also constitutes many aspects that do not operate in an isolated manner. As Kong (2014) argues, research capitalizing on identity theories should place greater emphasis on how two aspects of identity – roles and virtues – match up.

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