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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 highlighted the importance of practice and values in enacting a professional identity, a framework is lacking that allows investigations to be done empirically. Based on a discourse analytic framework, this paper will demonstrate 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: client, unspecified/general, professional peer, employer and professional association. The legal profession places greater emphasis on the roles of client and professional peer, whereas accountancy professionals tend to represent their identity roles more generally, although 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:

Communicative competence, professional communication, identity roles, identity virtues, coprusanalysis, codes of ethics

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1. Introduction

In the face of the increasingly specialized division of labor, many professionals are now expected to possess high levels of competence that are subject to public scrutiny for accountability, assessment, and 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 takes 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), adopting an inductive methodology, to professional competence, highlights the attributes required to perform a task successfully (Boyatzis 1982; Calhoun *et al.* 2008).

While the approach may be easier to be executed through interviews and other techniques such as repertory grid techniques (Lester 2014a), it tends to downplay the nuanced role of context, knowledge and power (Saks 2012). On the other hand, 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 (Billett and Harteis 2014; Lave and Wenger 1991). The drawback, nevertheless, is its more subjective nature and 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, that is the set of values and dispositions expected of its practitioners when they communicate with clients, peers and the public. A key assumption is that ‘professionalism is largely defined by context’ (Health and Care Professions Council 2014) and 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 them 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: interactional roles and dispositions. The former is also known as identity roles, and the latter as identity virtues (Kong 2014). This paper, which reports the first stage of our project on workplace communication competence, examines the interactional roles and dispositions, i.e. 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 development of a framework for identifying the salient features in actual professional discourse for comparison and training purposes.

In the following , the corpus methodology of this study will be spelt out. The most frequently occurring items across the three codes of ethics, such as ‘Members ... shall,’ ‘Accountants ... shall,’ etc., were examined to identify the major textual patterns expressing identity roles and identity virtues. The concordance lines of co-occurring items were then carefully studied to determine the implications of the most salient

identity roles and identity virtues in the three professions examined. This paper will end with a summary and 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 deemed to be competent. Although the notion of professional competence is a relatively more transparent term compared with professionalism, it has been seen unproblematically as a simple possession of specialized knowledge and expertise acquired through years of training, with many other important aspects such as communication in real situations ignored (Boyatzis 1982; Klemp 1977; Sarangi 2018).

As Epstein and Hundert (2002: 226) argues, professional competence is more than possession of professional knowledge and skills and they define it 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 serv[ed].’ This definition is underpinned by seven dimensions of professional competence: cognitive (e.g., core knowledge of the profession), technical (e.g., procedural skills), integrative (e.g., incorporating cognitive and practical judgment), context (e.g., use of time), relationship (e.g., communication skills with clients and peers), affective (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 dimensions to differing degrees.

In a study of the websites of 264 professional associations in Hong Kong, only two of them explicitly 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 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 will 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 seeing the complex relationship between language and identity, the terms associated with identity such as self, role and status have been sometimes used interchangeably, causing confusion and difficulties for empirical comparison (Sarangi 2010). This is far from desired and there needs to be a more rigorous use of terms. In this paper, we consider two concepts of identity to be particularly relevant to the construction of professional discourse: ‘footing,’ as developed by Goffman (1981), and ‘habitus,’ as developed by Bourdieu (1991). Footing, which is also known as ‘voice’ in Bakhtin’s sense, is the alignment or stance someone takes in an interaction. It is what Goffman (1981: 128) calls the ‘projected self’: ‘A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance’. This awareness of ‘otherness’ is an important but often neglected aspect of identity and has been associated with other important notions such as patient-centred approach in healthcare (Sarangi 2007). In order to avoid confusion, this awareness of one’s role vis-à-vis others will be referred to as ‘identity role’ in this

paper.

Another concept that informs this project is the idea of 'habitus,' which Bourdieu (1991) defines as both the self that is conditioned by norms and the self that structures norms. In this paper, the disposition or tendency to act in a certain manner is regarded as an 'identity virtue', but it should be noted that virtues or identity virtues should not be confused with the concepts of footing or identity roles mentioned above. Identity virtues are more flexible and subject to individual interpretation. For example, a manager can choose to be a more accountable or 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. Also, which identity virtues are highlighted and displayed has a lot to do with the identity role/interactional role one engages with. For example, when playing the role of rule-maker, a manager has to demonstrate the virtue of impartiality. When playing the role of facilitator, in contrast, he or she has to highlight the virtues of understanding.

What we would like to emphasize here is that there is no one-to-one matching relationship. Virtues change in accordance with one's interactional roles with others. In

other words, the relationship between identity roles and identity virtues can be better understood as the figure-ground relationship in Gestalt psychology as suggested by Sarangi (2010). Roles are more situated shifts and changes in affiliation or alignments with participants and contexts while virtues are enactments of relatively more inherent values treasured by interlocutors. More details will be 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 and categories //rephrase – too many ands//

Ethical codes are important genres 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. This is the reason why it falls into the category of regulatory discourse. Despite their prime importance in regulating the behavior of professionals, codes of practice have attracted not enough attention from discourse perspectives, with Hogben and Boddington's works (2006 for example) in health-care contexts as exceptions. Of some of the linguistic studies investigating the genre, organizational structures, move structures in particular, have been the major focus (Kong 2014). However, 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, apart from 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. For example, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 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

Other professional regulatory bodies have very similar codes. However, there may be important attributes that are specific to particular professions. For example, loyalty to the profession or company may be an important virtue in some professions, whereas the ability to cooperate and persuade others is treasured in others (Bennion 1969). In this research, we add a number of these salient attributes to the five common standards

outlined above, which will be discussed in greater detail in methodology. These attributes will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3 Methodology below. Linguistically, we also need a better 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. 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.

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 but studies along that line of investigation are very limited, and existing literature tends to divide professions broadly into scholarly professions and consulting professions (Bayles 2010: 10): ‘A scholarly professional usually works for a salary rather than as an entrepreneur who depends on attracting individual clients,’ whereas a consulting professional ‘traditionally practice[s] on a fee-for-service basis with a personal, individual relationship [with the] client.’

Consulting professions are characterized by (1) the importance of their services; (2) the

monopolistic nature of their professional practices; and (3) the self-regulation of their professional members. Examples of members of the consulting professions include consulting engineers, lawyers and accountants. 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: 11)

They also have a monopoly on the provision of services, with only those who have qualified legally permitted to practice, which 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: 11). Finally, consulting professions are 'self-regulated and are not subject to too much public control' (Bayles 2010: 11).

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 between the scholarly and consulting professions are sometimes blurred. After all, professions evolve their own ideologies, patterns of socialization and discourse practices. In this paper, we focus on how three types of consulting professionals—consulting engineers, lawyers and accountants—construct identity roles and identity virtues vis-à-vis their professional codes of practice. The three professions were chosen because they are more common professions in most countries.

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, corpus-based empirical analysis was used to demonstrate how it can contribute 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 of 2015 that represent three broad professional categories: engineering/surveying, law and accountancy. All the manuals were originally written in English. Engineering and surveying professions are combined because of their close alliance to 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) the behavior that is acceptable in carrying out the duties of the profession; and (3) the behavior that is 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.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

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 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 are not necessarily immediately adjacent to each other, as *ConcGram* allows a maximum gap of three words between them (Greaves 2009). Not all of the concordances generated were used in data analysis, as some concerned entitlements (e.g., a *Member* who is an employed barrister *shall* not be entitled to vote on....) //check syntax// instead of the responsibilities/obligations that are the current focus. The number of relevant concordances generated by *ConcGram* (Greaves 2009) are listed in Table 2.1.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

After the concordance lines containing the co-occurring words had been identified, they

were analyzed according to identity roles and identity virtues. But before the numerical analysis, all the concordance lines were closely read by a research colleague and one of us, in order to first come up with the potential identity roles and identity virtues. In some cases, the identity roles, whether they are clients or the general public, are spelt out explicitly while in others, inference has 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 will be coded as 'General'. As for the identity virtues, they are based on the five professional attributes of Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors as discussed above. Other virtues were derived from the 'communicative virtues' as proposed by Riley (2007) 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 standard or competence: 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).

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 standard or competence strictly refers to the use of professional knowledge in a more general sense, such as use of professional knowledge in day-to-day execution of activities. Professional standard will be used throughout the remaining paper so as to distinguish the concept from ‘competence’ commonly used in the literature to refer to competence in a general sense. Integrity and honesty also have overlapping meanings in a general sense. In this paper, integrity (or ‘being ethical’ to be more precise) refers to the upholding of ethical principles especially in cases where conflict of interest may arise such as bribery, while honesty refers to the accurate rendering and reporting of facts which may not be related to any benefits in monetary terms. In this paper, responsibility is interpreted more narrowly and refers to a professional’s sense of awareness of grey areas in practice and of a

profession's boundaries in relation to other professions (See also Solin and Ostman 2015 for a special issue on 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 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 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, Sarangi & Slembrouck 2006). As we will see, balancing of such contradictory forces in professional ethical decision making also extends 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 distribution of identity roles in the engineering/surveying sector:

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

As shown in the figure, the various audiences of the engineering/surveying profession are rather evenly distributed, particularly when compared with the two other professions. However, the two most significant roles are client (21%) and general (18%), which means that 21% and 18% of all of the concordance lines relate to clients and a general audience, respectively. 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 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, //be consistent in the use of American spelling// 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 profession (16%) itself is also an important identity role for engineers and surveyors, as shown in Figure 1. The role of the profession focuses on the relationship of the professional vis-à-vis the profession itself, whereas the role of professional peers concerns the professional relationship with people employed in a similar capacity. The role of the profession 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 the distribution of identity virtues in engineering/surveying.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Professional standards and integrity are the two most important identity virtues in engineering/surveying (32% each). In fact, the virtue of professional standards is equally emphasized among the three professions examined in this paper, which is to some extent 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)

The foregoing 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, the virtue of integrity,¹ in simple terms meaning fairness and strictly, refers to ethical values of impartiality in this paper. This virtue seems more important to 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 circumvent 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 the distribution of identity roles in the legal profession:

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

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, clients, 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 peers are 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 arena. 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 distribution of identity virtues in the legal sector:

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

As shown in Figure 4, responsibility (33%) and professional standards (32%) are the most frequently emphasized identity virtues in the legal arena. 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 inter-professional relationships are the basis of a strong sense of responsibility a legal professional body attempts to cultivate:

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 how identity roles are distributed in the accountancy profession:

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

As shown in Figure 5, 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, which will be discussed in detail under identity virtues.

The 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 how identity virtues are distributed in the accountancy profession:

[Insert Figure 6 here]

Similar to the legal profession, of the various identity virtues identified, the

accounting profession places the greatest emphasis on responsibility (constituting 37% of the total). Not only do accountants bear responsibility for the companies to which they belong, but 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.

Professional standards, which rank second, account for 29% of the identity virtues 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 threat and risks. The codes also expect accountants to perform professional services in the face of unfair conditions and to be scrupulous when suspicions arise. The emphasis again is on the importance of demonstrating professional standard as a collective group in dealing with the public.

The virtue of integrity is also important in the accounting field, ranking third (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 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 ethical codes are important documents for professional socialization and training/assessment purposes, their relationship with the notions such as professionalism and professional competence is yet to be explored. It has been argued in this paper that ethical 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 always perceived by the public as a homogenous group of institutional workers with the same expectations, our findings have clearly demonstrated the 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 for identity roles, engineering seems to be the profession with the most even

distribution, although the roles of client and general/unspecified are slightly more significantly represented. 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 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).

[Insert Figure 7 about here]

[Insert Figure 8 about here]

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. Both law and accountancy professions consider responsibility to be a priority, followed closely by professional standards (see Figure 8). In contrast, professional 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 all the three professions fall into the category of ‘consulting professions’ (Bayles 2010). 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 to find 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. In the long run, 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 bribes and other types of dishonest behavior.

The findings presented herein are of significant importance to the educators responsible for imparting professional values and virtues and to language teachers who teach these professionals how to act and communicate professionally and ethically 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)

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 inter-professional 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 Catts *et al.* (2011: 264) argue: ‘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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Tables, Diagrams and Figures

Professional Domain	Sub-corpus	Number (percentage) of words
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Engineering/ Surveying	Engineers (Hong Kong Institution of Engineers [HKIE])	1,375 (0.33%)
	Surveyors (Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors [HKIS])	3,521 (0.84%)
Law	Solicitors (Hong Kong Law Society [HKLS])	67,169 (16%)
	Barristers (Hong Kong Bar Association [HKBA])	43,950 (10.46%)
Accounting	General Accountants (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants [ACCA])	212,528 (50.57%)
	Public Accountants (Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants [HKICPA])	91,740 (21.83%)
		420,283 (100%)

Table 1: Information on the corpus used in this study

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

Table 2 Co-occurring words in sub-corpora examined

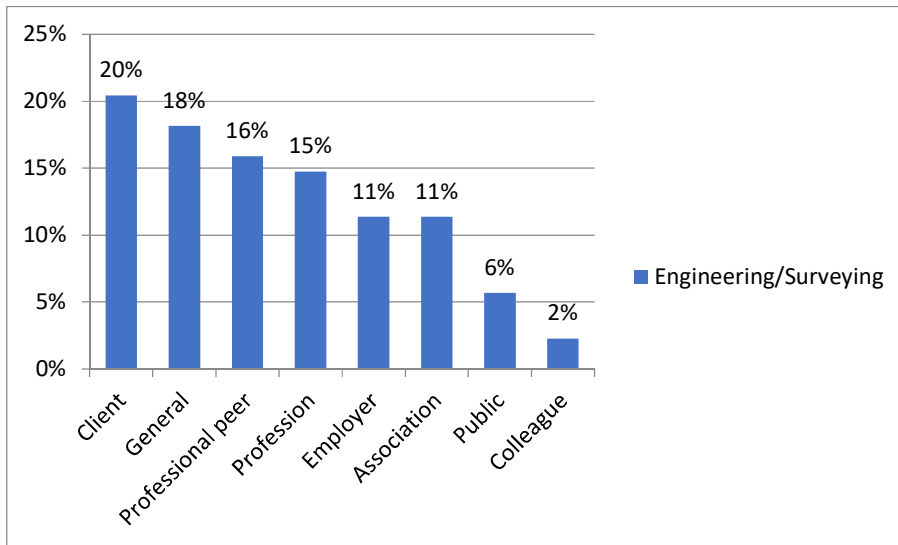


Figure 1 Identity roles involved in the engineering/surveying profession

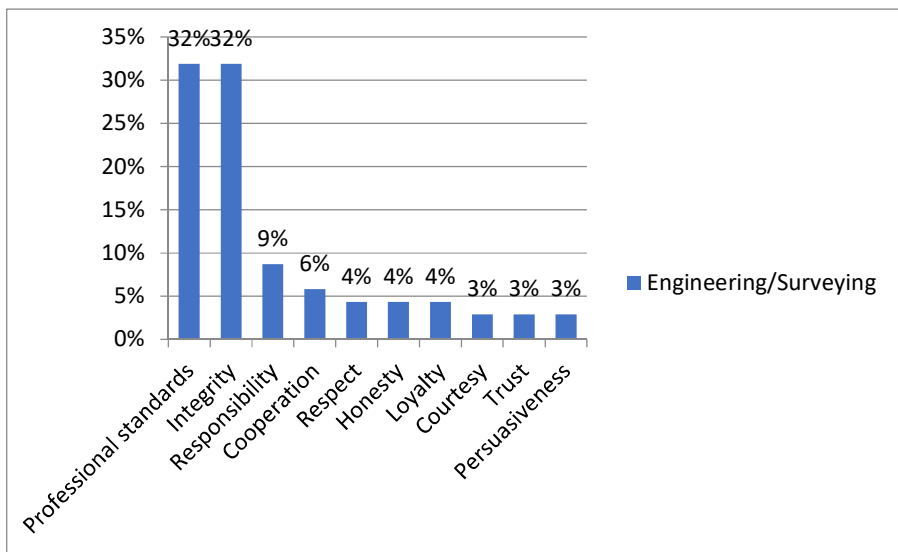


Figure 2 Identity virtues involved in engineering/surveying

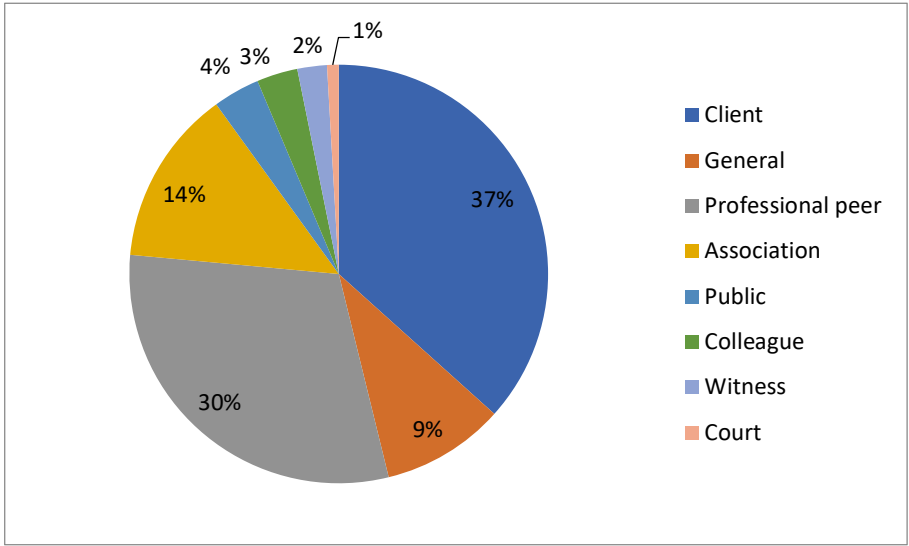


Figure 3 Identity roles involved in the legal profession

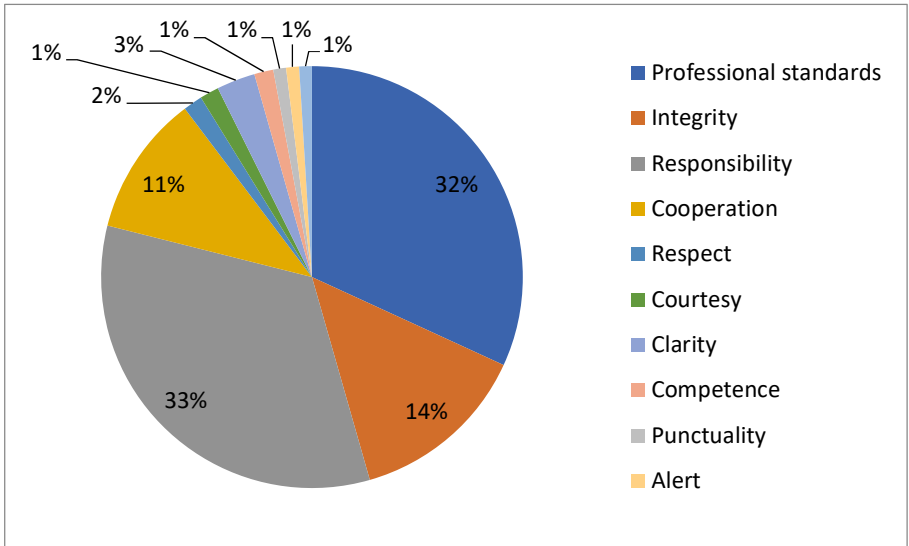


Figure 4 Identity virtues involved in the legal profession

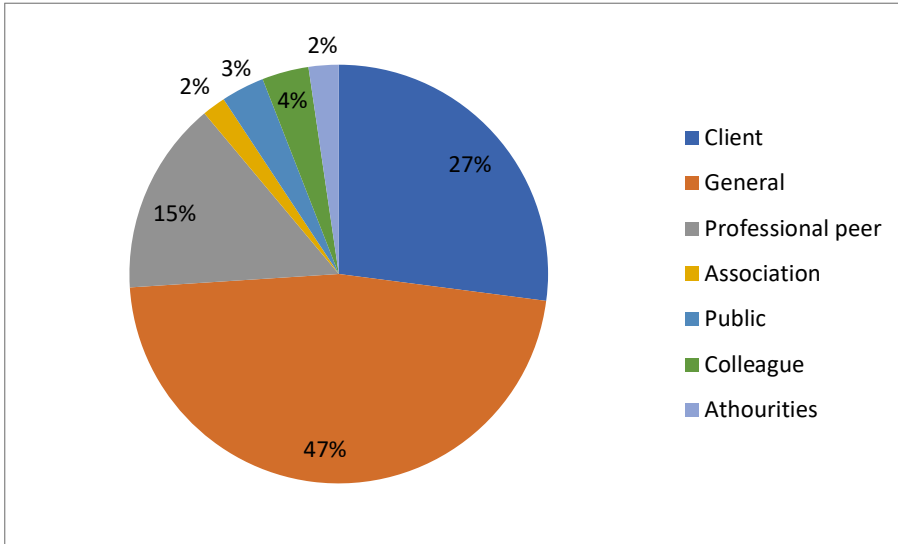


Figure 5 Identity roles involved in accountancy profession

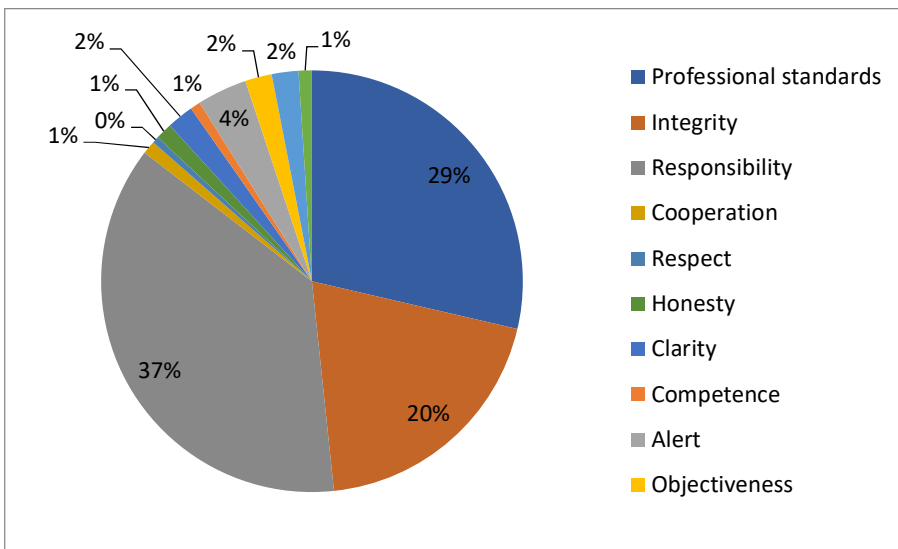


Figure 6 Identity virtues involved in accountancy profession

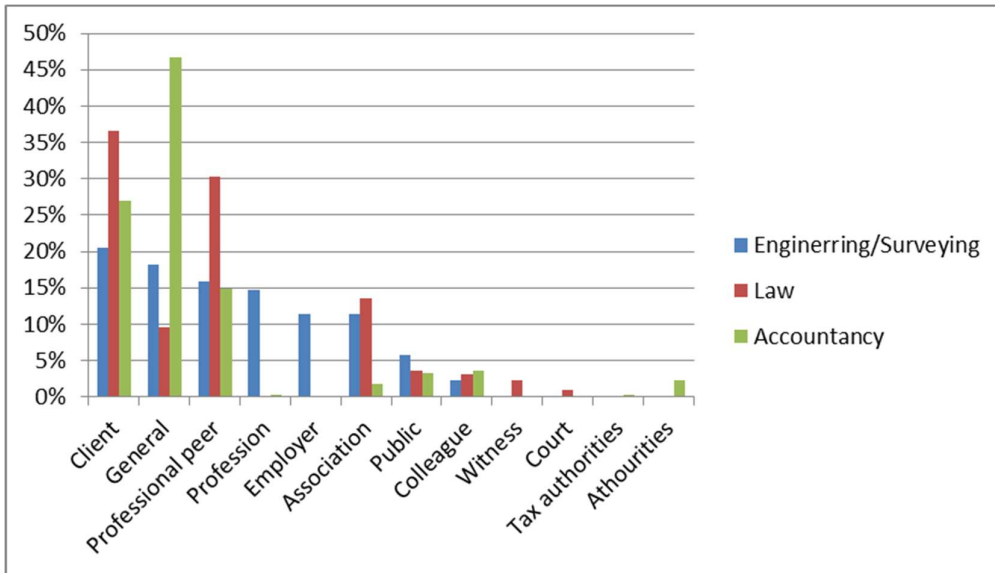


Figure 7 Comparison of identity roles among the three professions

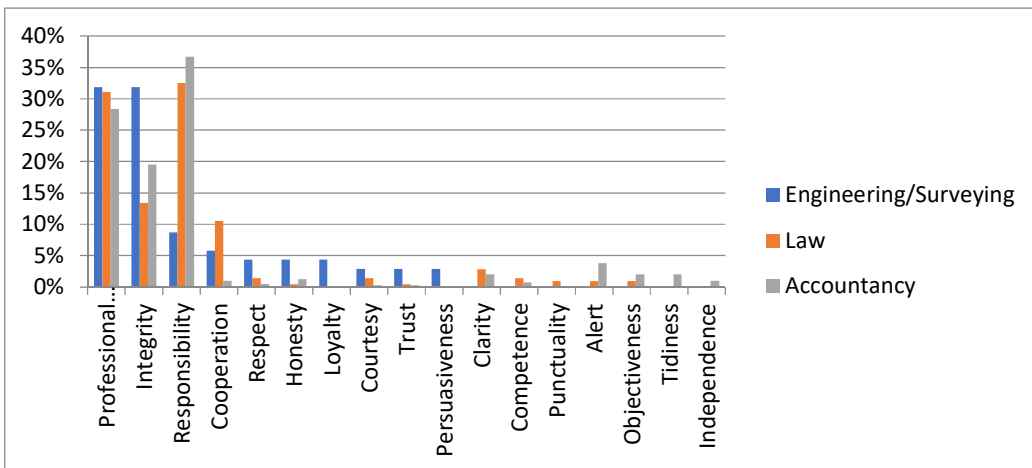


Figure 8 Comparison of identity virtues among the three professions

ⁱ In this study, integrity refers to the narrowly defined ethical conduct or behavior in a profession such as forbiddance of bribery and proper handling of confidential information, whereas honesty pertains to accurate disclosure of facts and figures. Please also see Section 3 Methodology for details for the definitions of each identity virtue.