

Educational psychologists and multi-agency working: exploring professional identity

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This research was conducted in the light of the *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, London, 2003) agenda which highlights the importance of multi-agency working. The research explored the professional identity of Educational Psychologists (EPs) with experience of multi-agency working in six Local Authorities within the Midlands area. Ten EPs participated in detailed semi-structured interviews.

Activity Theory was used to facilitate the comparison of aspects of the EPs' two work roles, as part of the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and as part of a multi-agency team (MAT). Each EP was asked to consider different elements of their two roles, using a series of questions designed to elicit relationships between the ways in which they worked, the contexts and the other people involved. From these questions, issues of professional identity emerged and these were then explored in more detail.

The experiences of EPs working in MATs were generally described very positively. It appeared that multi-agency working enhanced feelings of professional identity. In some cases participants indicated that this was aided by the clarification and development of their own skills and in other cases by being afforded the opportunity to work creatively in a wider range of contexts. The flexibility of multi-agency working appears to have presented opportunities for individuals to work to their strengths and increased positive feelings EPs have of their own professional identity.

Keywords: Educational Psychologist; multi-agency working; professional identity

Introduction

Aim

The main aim of this study was to explore changes in views about the professional identity of Educational Psychologists (EPs) working part of the week in a multi-agency team (MAT) and part of the week in an Educational Psychology Service (EPS). Professional identity is a complex and multi-faceted concept and this topic will be explored within the article. The study used the framework of Activity Theory to support participants in exploring their current role as well as their views relating to professional identity.

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Multi-agency working – the role of the EP

The role of the EP within Children's Services, following the introduction of the *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) agenda, has been under increasing scrutiny. Although multi-agency working has been high on the political agenda for a number of years and is referenced in a number of governmental and professional documents (e.g. Farrell et al., 2006; Kelly & Gray, 2000), the recent introduction of Children's Services has resulted in a number of significant changes in service delivery. Some EPs are spending part of their time in MATs and, in areas of the country, most of EP work takes place in MATs. Restructuring into MATs is likely not only to result in changes in styles of working, but also to have an effect on perceptions of professional identity. The consideration of inter-professional boundaries may be seen as threatening to professional identity (e.g. Booker, 2005).

Stoker, Gersch, Fox, Lown, and Morris (2001) draw attention to the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) document *Educational Psychology Services (England): Current role, good practice and future directions* (Kelly & Gray, 2000). This highlights multi-agency working along with early years' work and work with schools as the three "core functions that should be delivered by all EP Services" (Stoker, Gersch, Fox, Lown, & Morris, 2001, p.88). In identifying the type of activities involved in working with other agencies, Kelly and Gray (2000) list joint planning and intervention between EPSs and other agencies, e.g. Looked After Children, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. In addition, EP attendance at multi-agency meetings such as case conferences and Behaviour and Education Support Team (BEST) meetings is recommended. Jointly-funded posts, for example, between Social Care and Education, are highlighted and viewed as providing "a mechanism for a more co-ordinated approach to multi-agency working and the development of a shared agenda" (Kelly & Gray, 2000, p. 37).

However, with more recent developments (the move to Children's Services configurations), the exploration of the role of the EP has been revisited in a government commissioned review of practice. Again, multi-agency working is referenced, along with work in relation to pupils with special educational needs (SEN), strategic work and capacity building as ways of addressing the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes. However, this review identifies that EPs have historically been involved in working with a wide range of professionals and they focus their review of multi-agency work on:

- (1) The range of multi-agency contexts in which EPSs are involved.
 - (2) The nature of EP work in multi-agency settings and its impact on the five outcomes.
 - (3) EPs' distinctive contribution in multi-agency work.
- (Farrell et al., 2006, p. 36)

This research identifies a number of multi-agency contexts in which EPs work, for example, BESTs and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. In the majority of cases respondents considered that more EPs should be involved in such work than there are currently. In relation to the EP contribution within multi-agency work, schools were less likely to consider that EPs held a distinctive role (40–68% of respondents) than other respondents (82–100%). The role of the EP was explored further and it was suggested that in almost all cases "the positive contribution made by EPs to meeting

the ECM [*Every Child Matters*] outcomes for children ... was described as distinctive" (Farrell et al., 2006, p. 43).

In addition multi-agency working may offer a distinctive EP contribution in "building bridges between school and community" (Farrell et al., 2006, p. 43). The distinctive role of the EP is explored further by Cameron (2006) who invites consideration of five factors; the psychological perspective, uncovering mediating variables, unravelling problem dimensions, using evidence-based recommendations and promoting big ideas. All of these factors may be useful for EPs to promote in multi-professional work settings.

The large scale changes in the service delivery of EPSs and the move towards "joined up" multi-agency working appear to be instigating major changes in the role of the EP. These changes associated with "joined-up working" are considered likely to impact on perceptions of professional identity. Booker (2005) draws attention to the possible critical nature of professional identity with respect to the current climate of change. He suggests that "professional identity is a particularly crucial issue for psychologists in any move to integrated services" (Booker, 2005, p. 135). Whether or not EPs have a choice over the nature of the teams they join is likely to be an important factor in terms of positive perceptions of the new ways of working and impacts on their professional esteem and identity.

Identity

Social identity

Historically, identity has tended to be thought of as stable and enduring (e.g. Weigert & Teitge, 1986). However, the more recent "post-modern social constructionist view" considers identity to be fluid and developed through social interactions and narrative (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). This difference in conceptualisation of identity is important when considering literature related to social and professional identity and it is this later "social constructionist view" which will be the focus of this study.

In a consideration of professional identity, it is important first to explore the wider concept of social identity, as work-related identity is cited as an element of this (Turner, 1999). "Social Identity Theory" was developed by Turner and Brown (1978), following the work of Tajfel (1972). A premise of the theory is that aspects of a person's self-concept are based on his or her group membership and that social comparisons produce pressure for inter-group differentiation. It is argued that individuals display "a need for positive social identity, expressed through a desire to create, maintain or enhance the positively valued distinctiveness of ingroups compared to outgroups on relevant dimensions" (Turner, 1999, p. 8).

Lewis and Crisp (2004) highlight commitment as an important factor in how individuals perceive groups. It is suggested that people who identify themselves highly with a particular social group, for example ethnic or occupational, feel that this group is a source of satisfaction and esteem. They further indicate research which suggests that "the extent of identification, in conjunction with some sort of threat to self esteem ... has been reliably shown to affect numerous social psychological processes, from the extent to which people feel that social groups are similar or different, through to prejudice and discrimination between such groups" (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; cited by Lewis & Crisp, 2004, p. 406).

Threats to identity

Threats to identity are considered particularly relevant to the present study in the light of the rapid changes in service delivery as a result of the *Every Child Matters* agenda. As Booker (2005, p. 36) states: "Identity issues loom large for the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) in a big bang approach to creating an integrated service". It is possible that these "identity issues" may well be present in EPs as they begin to work in MATs.

Branscome, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1999) note that much of the literature on threat to identity (see Breakwell, 1986) focuses on what they refer to as "threats to the value of group identity or its distinctiveness" (Branscome et al., 1999, p. 36). They further propose four classes of identity threat:

- (1) Categorisation threat (being categorised against one's will);
 - (2) Distinctiveness threat (group distinctiveness is prevented or undermined);
 - (3) Threats to the value of social identity (the group's value is undermined);
 - (4) Acceptance threat (one's position within the group is undermined).
- (Branscombe et al., 1999, p. 36)

A central theme, highlighted by the authors is the variation in an individual's response to threat depending on his/her feelings of commitment towards the particular social group. A person who has strong feelings of commitment towards a particular group is described as a "high identifier" within that group. An individual who has weak feelings of commitment towards a particular group is described as a "low identifier" within that group. Table 1 outlines the predicted responses to the different types of threat by high and low identifiers.

Table 1. Responses to threats to identity (adapted from Branscome et al., 1999, p. 37).

Class of threat	Who is likely to respond?	Type of response
1. Categorisation – being categorised against one's will	Low identifiers	Stress ingroup heterogeneity Further disidentification Stress unique personal qualities
	High identifiers	None
2. Distinctiveness – group distinctiveness is prevented or undermined	Low identifiers	Perceive groups at superordinate level
	High identifiers	Display outgroup derogation Perceive ingroup homogeneity Increased stereotyping
3. Value – the group's value is undermined	Low identifiers	Further disidentification
	High identifiers	Display outgroup derogation Perceive ingroup homogeneity Increased stereotyping
4. Acceptance – one's position within the group is undermined	Low identifiers	None
	High identifiers	Display outgroup derogation Sliming ^a (to attain acceptance)

^aThe authors of this article interpret "sliming" as referring to the suggestion that high identifiers "will try to present themselves to other ingroup members as holding especially favourable and prototypical attitudes towards the ingroup" (Branscome et al., 1999, p. 52).

This model is considered with reference to the present study and the participants' membership of both an EPS and a MAT. Table 2 shows the research findings from the current study in relation to these categories.

Professional identity

Busher (2005) suggests that "people develop their work-related (professional) self-identities through their interactions with other people in a variety of milieu through time" (p. 137). He proceeds to argue that these identities are a product of individual histories, personalities and work-related experiences (Goodson, 1992; Nias, 1999; Thomas, 1995). For all employees who work within schools it is suggested that their past experiences as pupils and students within educational establishments also contribute to professional identities (Gersten, 1995).

Recently, several studies have explored the creation of professional identity (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Egan, 2004), the concept of professional identity in relation to threat to the professional group (Lewis & Crisp, 2004), the relationship between worker identity and learning at work (Billett & Somerville, 2004; Rhodes & Scheeres, 2004) and the impact of multi-agency working on professional identity and learning (Robinson, Anning, & Frost 2005).

Particularly of interest in the context of this research are responses to the threat to the professional group and the impact of multi-agency working on professional identity and learning. Lewis and Crisp (2004) attempted to conceptualise the feelings of professional identity in individuals who were also members of a professional email group working with children with SEN.

Counter to their hypothesising, the results indicated that individuals who posted a high number of emails to the professional email group perceived themselves as less typical of workers in the field. However, these high email group message senders were more likely to "identify with SEN as a group" (Lewis & Crisp, 2004, p. 404). They suggest that an interpretation may be that high message senders consider themselves as "change agents leading the way in taking issues about special needs to a wider audience" (p. 416). In relation to the current research, this may indicate that EPs working as part of a MAT might perceive themselves as less typical of the EP group, and identify more highly with multi-agency working.

Lewis and Crisp (2004) conclude that there is a need for further exploration of social identity in relation to "special professionals", drawing attention to concerns over inter-agency work in the special needs context. They highlight the well documented difficulties in facilitating effective inter-agency working (Cook, Gerrish, & Clarke, 2001; Granville & Langton, 2002; Webb & Vulliamy, 2001) and draw upon recent examples of government policy, e.g. Health Action Zones, Sure Start and Education Action Zones, in arguing that "approaches that support social identities are likely to be more productive than strategies which, probably unwittingly, threaten such identities" (Lewis & Crisp, 2004, p. 417). This research supports the consideration of professional identity as integral to the development of effective multi-agency working.

Professional learning and professional identity are also identified as linked components. Bathmaker and Avis (2004, p. 47) note that in many countries, similar to the UK, "learning is seen as the key to economic competitiveness, social stability and active citizenship (see e.g. DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2002; DTI & DfEE, 2001; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999)". Whilst Billett and Somerville (2004, p. 310) cite the work of Lave (1993), Rogoff (1995) and Lave and Wenger (1991), suggesting that "the

processes of thinking, acting, and learning at work are one and the same and coincident ... and include the formation of working and learning identities or subjectivities”.

In discussing pedagogy and learning, Rhodes and Scheeres (2004) view pedagogy as related to identity formation and change, for example, the relationship between an organisation’s statement of values and worker identity, as well as skill and knowledge development (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003; Scheeres & Iedema, 2002). This body of research supports the connection between professional/work identities and learning as identified by Warmington et al. (2005).

Robinson et al. (2005) explore the impact of multi-agency working on identity, learning and roles of education professionals. The research draws upon the theoretical frameworks proposed by Wenger (1998) and Engeström (1999) – namely Socio-cultural psychology and Activity Theory. It is argued that the research “strongly suggests that a key factor underpinning positive professional attitudes, and hence organizational climate, in multi-agency teams is enhancement of individual professional identity” (Robinson et al., 2005, p. 189). They also argue that Activity Theory offers a useful conceptual framework to develop understanding of professional identity.

Robinson et al. (2005, p. 189), in a similar manner to Lewis and Crisp (2004), conclude that their evidence “suggests a need for further work to illuminate how professional identity is discursively grounded, shaped, and transformed, so that teachers can be prepared for the re-grounding and reshaping which joined-up practice involves”. They argue that this exploration is important, not just to teachers, but to all professionals becoming involved in multi-agency working.

The current research study provides the opportunity to explore professional identity with EPs involved both in generic work (based within an EPS) and in multi-agency work (based with a MAT).

Method

Phase one

Phase one of this study aimed to use qualitative methods to explore with EPS Senior Managers the nature of current multi-agency working within the Midlands and how work is being organised in response to the *Every Child Matters* agenda. Although this phase of the study produced some interesting findings, (see Gaskell, 2006, for further details) they are not discussed in this article as they do not directly relate to professional identity.

Phase two

Study design

A flexible research design exploring professional identity and multi-agency working was adopted. Second generation Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001) was used to facilitate the comparison of aspects of the EPs’ two work roles, i.e. within the EPS and within the MAT. Activity Theory was considered particularly relevant to the study’s focus on professional identity as it offers an opportunity to consider work-based activities within a social and historical context. Hence, as the EP role is moving through a series of transitions, due to central and local government changes, it is important to note how these external factors are affecting the work of EPs and how this, in turn, is affecting the way that EPs view themselves and the contributions they make.

Activity theoretical approaches also allow consideration of the links between the individual and the organisation within which they work. This is very important when a complex situation, such as professionals working within two different contexts, is the object of study. Placing the EP as the “subject” of an activity system allowed structured reflections to be made regarding his/her changing position when undertaking different roles, e.g. generic work and specialist multi-agency work. Leadbetter (2005, 2006) describes how Activity Theory can be used as a research tool, especially within complex, multi-perspective contexts.

Procedure

Ten EPs, working for part of their week in a MAT (four in BESTs, two in Early Years Teams, two in Child Development Centres, one in Child and Adolescent Mental Health and one in a Health Team) and part of the week in an EPS, participated in the study. It is recognised that the number of participants is small in this exploratory study but this allowed the in-depth exploration of professional identity with EPs through a detailed interview structure. A semi-structured interview schedule based on Activity Theory was used. For each setting (EPS and MAT) the EP was asked to consider the rules (e.g. legislation, service level agreements, accountability, ethical guidelines); communities (e.g. schools, social services, health services, children’s services, society, government); division of labour (e.g. EP as consultant, test administrator, facilitator; mediating artefacts); tools and signs (e.g. protocols, questions, procedures, language, tests and any contradictions between these elements, e.g. between the language used as a tool and the community).

As Activity Theory was new to participants, they were presented with an example prior to beginning the interview and scaffolding through the process. This involved talking through with participants a pre-formulated example of an activity system related to EP work. Subsequently, EPs were asked to formulate activity systems relating to their own work.

Following the creation of activity systems, perceptions of professional identity were explored through interview questions and prompts.

Data analysis

Information gathered from interviews was transcribed and considered collaboratively by the research team. Some key themes were identified using a grounded approach whilst other responses were classified according to the pre-determined categories of Activity Theory (e.g. rules, division of labour).

Results

From the themed analysis of the data, further consideration enabled broader focus areas to emerge which are discussed later.

Professional identity

Contribution/distinctive role of the EP in multi-agency working

Responses suggest that early in their involvement in multi-agency working a number of EPs were unclear about their contribution to the MATs; for example, one EP

experienced “a sense of – not deskilling – but a sense of ‘what have I got to offer over and above what’s already here?’” As a result of this perception, professional identity is questioned and responses indicate that a challenge to the EPs’ perceptions of their role and use of psychology may ensue. However, this lack of role clarity appears to diminish over time, with EPs indicating a developing understanding of their individual areas of strength and the contribution they may make to a MAT; for example, one participant said: “You find your niche and know where you’ve got to go; what you’ve got to do.”

In addition to this, EPs also indicated an understanding of other professionals’ contributions to multi-agency working and that roles may vary according to individual group members’ areas of strength and expertise. This could be seen as an example of the formation of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). One participant noted that although the EP has a unique contribution to make, a number of roles in MATs are “negotiable and get allocated according to strengths and preferences of the people in the team”. However, it is of note that although the perceived blurring of roles within the MAT was viewed positively by a number of participants, this lack of clarity was associated with lower confidence in working in a MAT for one participant.

With respect to the distinctive role of the EP within multi-agency working, five common themes emerged:

- use of psychology;
- developing a holistic view;
- evidence based practice;
- interpersonal skills; and
- experience of working in the education system.

Respondents noted that the experience the EP has of working in the education system was highly valued. This knowledge and skill base may be taken for granted when working primarily with other educational professionals, but appears to be seen as important by EPs working in MATs.

Group identification

Many of the EPs indicated that changes in their professional identity had occurred, although a minority of the participants suggested that this was not the case. A number of responses highlighted enhanced positive feelings about their professional identity within a MAT, noting that they experienced stronger feelings of identity within this group than the EP group; for example, one participant stated: “I think my identity within multi-agency working is much stronger and much clearer.”

In discussing identification as a psychologist a number of respondents said that they felt more of a psychologist in a multi-agency context, although one participant did not think of him/herself as a psychologist. Stronger identification with being a psychologist appeared to be connected to opportunities to apply and validate psychological skills. These can be seen as being associated with increased opportunities to be flexible and creative in the way work is approached; for example, one participant stated: “When I gave up the multi-agency team work and went back to a patch, it was a little frustrating at times. I found it was more inhibiting and less creative.”

Whilst some respondents still considered themselves EPs, some no longer wished to identify themselves as an EP. One EP suggested that multi-agency working had forced him/ her to reconsider the role of the EP, while another thought the title EP may be a barrier to multi-agency working. This was viewed as a possible result of other professionals' perceptions of EPs. Whilst discussing the title of EP, one participant stated: "I very much see myself as a psychologist, particularly a child psychologist."

Perceptions by others were also seen as influential in professional identity, with some psychologists indicating different feelings in different contexts; for example, some participants indicated stronger perceptions of professional identity in their role as part of a MAT.

Development of skills

In discussing professional development, a number of participants appeared to appreciate the opportunity to realise, validate and develop skills and knowledge. They noted that multi-agency working had provided opportunities for them to reconsider their contribution as well as to develop their psychological skills. For some this involved exploring alternative paradigms, whilst for others it was realising their individual psychological skills and developing these; for example, one respondent stated: "I value the skills that I've got more ... I think it's more about being able to work in schools ... the preventative work, particularly the action research projects."

Value

The experience of being valued and offering a valid and beneficial contribution to multi-agency working appears also to have positive effects on perceptions of professional identity. Many of the EPs interviewed indicated that the skills required for working within the education system, which may be taken for granted in single agency working, were valued highly within MATs. One respondent highlighted, not only how the EP contribution was valued, but also how multi-agency working had increased his/ her appreciation of the contributions of others: "I think the difference it's made is that I hugely value the contributions of other professionals involved and what I've found is that I get much better feedback from other professionals involved. So they value my input as a psychologist, just as I value their input from their professional group."

Discussion

At a time of significant change within the EP profession, this research study aimed to consider a model of multi-agency working whereby EPs were part of a MAT whilst retaining their role within an EPS. This is a contrasting model from the "big bang" approach described by Booker (2005) and the results of this research study indicate some positive effects on perceptions of professional identity in these multi-agency contexts. The discussion aims to link the findings of this small scale exploratory research study to the existing research.

Multi-agency working – the role of the EP

Identifying the unique contribution of the EP has a high political profile currently (Farrell et al., 2006). In many instances, EPs indicated that many of the roles in a

MAT were interchangeable, with less distinctive roles identifiable. However, some roles were viewed as particular to EPs, such as the application of psychology, problem-solving skills, knowledge of the education system, team-working and the ability to develop a holistic picture. Farrell et al. (2006, p. 43) indicate that a distinctive EP contribution to multi-agency working may be "building bridges between school and community". It is likely that knowledge of the education system and the ability to develop a holistic picture may be seen as influential in achieving this contribution.

Social identity

Booker (2005) perceives "identity issues" for Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) to be a result of the rapid rate of change in the development of integrated services. It was considered that these issues, or threats to identity, may also be apparent to EPs working in MATs. It is interesting to consider the threats to identity proposed by Branscome et al. (1999) in relation to group identification. Table 2 outlines the four categories of threat, and the type of response predicted alongside relevant data from the research findings. For this analysis, the "group" is taken to be the original EPS allegiance.

There are some possible links between the study data and these threats to professional identity. Many of the responses indicated positive effects on feelings of professional identity as a result of working in a MAT. In fact, in many cases, the MAT appeared to have become the "ingroup" with a number of EPs indicating strong feelings of identification with the MAT rather than the EPS. It may be of interest to consider this model in relation to "forced" membership of a MAT, as it is likely that all the participants of this study had chosen to take up the challenge of spending part of their professional work time within a MAT.

Professional identity

Changing professional identities

Busher (2005) indicates that professional identities are shaped by interactions with other people over a period of time. This suggests that EPs might notice a change in their perceptions of professional identity as a result of multi-agency working. In many interviews this was stated, with EPs indicating that their multi-agency role had shaped their professional identity. However, a minority of EPs indicated they felt multi-agency working had not influenced their perceptions of professional identity.

Research literature also indicates that identities are a product of individual histories, personalities and work-related experiences (Goodson, 1992; Nias, 1999; Thomas, 1995). Individual work related experiences appear to have affected EPs' identification with the title "EP". A variety of responses was noted, e.g. some participants indicated a desire to disassociate from this categorisation as they felt it may act as a barrier to successful working. Alternatively, some responses indicated strong identification with the EP group. The experiences of working in a MAT appear to have enhanced positive perceptions of professional identity as a psychologist through the opportunity to develop skills and apply them in a wider range of contexts.

Table 2. Summary of responses to threats to identity.

Class of threat	Type of response suggested	Study data
Categorisation threat – being categorised against one's will	• Low Identifiers may respond to this threat by: - Stressing ingroup heterogeneity - Further disidentification - Stressing unique personal qualities	• Some responses suggested disidentification with the EP group, with participants identifying more with the MAT group • Some responses stressed the unique personal qualities and skills of individuals within the MAT, with participants suggesting that this was more important than professional role in allocating tasks
Distinctiveness threat – group distinctiveness is prevented or undermined	• Low Identifiers perceive groups at a superordinate level • High Identifiers - Display outgroup derogation - Perceive ingroup homogeneity - Increase stereotyping	• Many of the responses suggested a “blurring of professional boundaries” with less clearly defined roles • However, it was indicated that EPs retained a unique role within MAT (possible perceived ingroup homogeneity)
Threats to the value of social identity – the group's value is undermined	• Low Identifiers display further disidentification • High Identifiers - Display outgroup derogation - Perceive ingroup homogeneity - Increase stereotyping	• Some responses indicated a shift from identification with EP group (disidentification with EP label)
Acceptance threat – one's position within the group is undermined	• Low Identifiers display no response • High Identifiers display - Outgroup derogation	• No examples of outgroup (MAT) derogation were noted

Note: Low identifiers are defined as individuals who have low feelings of commitment towards a particular group (for these purposes, defined as the group of EPs), whilst high identifiers are defined as individuals who have high feelings of commitment towards a particular group.

As it is suggested that work-related experience impacts on identities (Goodson, 1992; Nias, 1999; Thomas, 1995) it would appear that less experienced EPs are at a different stage of identity formation compared to more experienced EPs. Responses from the present study indicate that this may be the case, with one recently qualified EP reporting lower feelings of confidence in multi-agency working than in generic work. For newly qualified EPs going straight into MATs, perceptions of positive professional identity may be influenced by limited work-related interactions and experience as an EP. The importance of contact with the EP professional group was emphasised and it may be that the development and consolidation of generic skills prior to multi-agency working could affect perceptions of professional identity within MATs. Booker (2005) stresses the importance of professional links with other EPs in terms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and supervision, especially when teams are mixed and geographically separated, and this was echoed

in some of the comments in this research study. In response to the continuing increase in multi-agency working, further research in this area could prove to be beneficial.

Finally, consistent with Busher (2005), interactions and perceptions of other professionals were viewed as affecting participants' perceptions of identity. Therefore, it can be considered that EPs' perceptions related to professional identity may differ depending on context – whether they are in a generic or multi-agency role. In this study, the perceptions of others “valuing” their contribution, e.g. through seeking their advice, appeared elevated in multi-agency working and this increased perceptions of self-esteem and enhanced feelings around professional identity.

Distinctiveness

Branscome et al. (1999) suggest that the need for distinctiveness may be more important than having a positive identity. The importance of distinctiveness, or in the case of this study, the unique contribution of the EP, was referred to frequently by respondents. Whilst some participants indicated that they had been challenged to reconsider the unique contribution of the EP, others found the role less clear and were unsure of their distinctive role. However, a number of responses suggested that, although many roles within multi-agency working were interchangeable, some were specific to the EP.

The valuing of this distinctive role was cited as enhancing perceptions of professional identity, suggesting that feelings of distinctiveness may contribute to perceived positive identity. The contribution made by EPs may not always have been predicted at the outset; for example, expertise and experience of working in the education system, which may be overlooked when working in a single agency, was highly valued in multi-agency working.

Learning and professional identity

Learning and professional identity are identified as linked components (e.g. Billett & Somerville, 2004; Warmington et al., 2005). In discussing professional identity, many of the EPs referred to the opportunities multi-agency working had created for developing skills and knowledge. This was seen to take place via interactions with other professionals, similar to Busher's (2005) findings, as well as via opportunities to explore alternative psychological paradigms and ways of working. In some cases, learning also took place in relation to identification of personal psychological skills which may be effectively developed and utilised within a MAT, e.g. team formation/building, psychological assessment and organisational psychology – knowledge of schools as organisations. Enhancing of specific skills appears to be a positive influence on perceptions of professional identity. This is aided by opportunities to be more creative in developing, planning and delivery of professional activities.

Learning about the roles and perspectives of other professional groups was also identified as important in developing positive professional identity. Such learning allows individual involvement to be contextualised within overall provision, e.g. through recognising the reciprocal value of professionals' input. The importance of learning in and for multi-agency working is born out in the literature which suggests that where learning occurs, multi-agency working is likely to be more successful (Warmington et al., 2005). In this research study learning was not considered to be

formal learning, but rather incidental learning through working closely with other professionals.

Conclusion

Research conducted by Robinson et al. (2005) argues that enhancing professional identity of individuals working in MATs is a key factor underpinning positive professional attitudes and organisational culture.

The results of the current study suggest that, in many cases, multi-agency working has resulted in an increase in positive perceptions of individual professional identity. Indicated within the data are possible contributing factors to these positive perceptions. These factors, which may be important to the consideration of effective multi-agency working, are outlined in Table 3.

Although this is a small scale exploratory study, some of the findings run counter to recent research, e.g. Booker (2005) who suggested that professional identity issues for EPs were potentially problematic during the current climate of huge organisational changes and re-organisations. By considering this in more detail, specific factors may be identified that are important in retaining and enhancing perceptions of professional identity. Clearly, an important contextual factor is whether or not the changes were with agreement of participants, whether they actively chose to make changes to their working arrangements (join a MAT for part of their time) or whether the changes were forced upon them. Nevertheless, even in situations where change may be forced upon the professional, it seems there are some positives to be gained and some important factors to seek to enhance or retain in order for EPs to feel positive about their positions, their roles and their contributions.

Within newly formed teams, positive identities are forged through opportunities to work and learn together and Wenger (1998), with his notion of developing communities of practice, gives helpful guidance on this. Thus, it appears that two elements need to be developed in parallel: encouraging a positive sharing and learning culture within new MATs, where individual expertise is respected and valued, alongside the retention and strengthening of core professional links, focussing upon the need for professionally relevant supervision and CPD whilst maintaining the principle of applying psychological theory and research to practice.

Table 3. Factors influencing positive professional identity for EPs working in MATs.

Possible factors influencing positive professional identity for EPs working in MATs
• Opportunities to engage in creative ways of working • Perceptions of value and distinctiveness of contribution to multi-agency working • Opportunities to realise, develop and apply skills in a range of contexts (individuals, groups, organisations) • Time to appreciate unique role within the MAT • Opportunities to develop an understanding of other professional roles and perspectives through working together • Opportunities to develop an understanding of the individual skills offered by members of the MAT (to consider these as well as/instead of professional role in task allocation) • Development of shared protocols and procedures, which are continually revisited and discussed • Development/negotiation of shared aims and objectives • Identification as a member of the MAT • Identification as a psychologist and retained contact with EP group

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