

Title: Including the Public as Meaningful Others in Professional Identity Formation

To the Editor,

We read with great interest the short communication by Haruta et al., which reconceptualizes autonomy in medical education as a dynamic interplay between ‘fixed norms’ and ‘relational responsiveness’.[1] Their culturally grounded framing offers valuable insight into professional identity formation (PIF), especially in diverse contexts.

We would like to offer a concrete example that resonates strongly with their theoretical framework. In our recent study involving Japanese medical students engaging in dialogue with members of the public, we found that such experiences fostered not only awareness of one’s professional identity but also its natural integration with personal identity [2]. From the perspective of Haruta et al.’s model, this may represent a meaningful synthesis of fixed norms and relational responsiveness—not an imposed ideal of “the professional,” but an internally grounded and socially responsive identity that enables resilience.

Through our observations in the educational setting, we found that students who seemed to internalize this natural integration exhibited greater resilience when

encountering difficulties. Haruta et al.'s framework provides a valuable theoretical perspective to understand this developmental process.

One further contribution we wish to offer is the explicit inclusion of non-clinical public actors—i.e., lay citizens—as meaningful “others” in the process of identity formation.

While Haruta et al. emphasizes colleagues, other professionals, patients, nature and technology, we propose that public dialogue also provides a unique, non-hierarchical context in which learners can co-construct meaning. These engagements are not without risk: relational responsiveness must remain anchored in internal standards. Yet we believe public perspectives may deepen those standards by embedding them within broader social frameworks.

We hope this contribution may help extend the discourse on how public engagement can be structurally integrated into medical education as a formative aspect of relational responsiveness in PIF.

Sincerely,

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References:

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2. Ikuno M, Akiko Tokinobu, Tomoko Miyoshi, Kataoka H. Dialogue with the public: A catalyst for professional identity formation in medical students. *PLOS ONE*. 2025;20(6):e0324506. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0324506>