SCRIBE OR ACTOR?
A SURVEY PAPER ON PERSONALITY PROFILES OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS

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1. Introduction

Despite the growing number of publications on a variety of facets of translation and interpreting studies, very little material exists on the personality of translators and interpreters. A seminar class led by Prof. Ingrid Kurz at the Institute of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Vienna, Austria, set itself the task of identifying the personality traits considered typical of translators and interpreters by practitioners and researchers in the field as well as by beginners and advanced students at the Vienna Institute.

This paper deals with existing literature in the field as well as a survey conducted among two groups of students. Both the theoretical and empirical parts of the paper are based on the communication value orientation model by Pierre Casse (1981: 127 ff). Personality traits considered necessary for or typical of translators and/or interpreters by various authors were identified and related to Casse's value orientations. Subsequently, Casse's self-assessment exercise was administered to beginners and advanced students at the Vienna Institute.

2. Communication value orientations according to Casse

The communication value orientation model by Pierre Casse (1981: 127 ff) distinguishes four groups of "communication value orientations": action-oriented, process-oriented, people-oriented, and idea-oriented.
The action-oriented style is dominant in people who "like action, doing, achieving, getting things done, improving, solving problems".

- The process-oriented style dominates in people who "like facts, organizing, structuring, setting up strategies, tactics".

- The people-oriented style is typical of individuals who "like to focus on social processes, interactions, communication, teamwork, social systems, motivation".

- The idea-oriented style is considered typical of people who "like concepts, theories, exchange of ideas, innovation, creativity, novelty".

According to Casse, everybody possesses all four value orientations to some extent, but has a dominant orientation or one he/she feels most comfortable with.

The value orientation model was chosen for this paper because it deals with intercultural communication. David and Margareta Bowen (D. Bowen 1994: 178) used the same model and Casse's self-assessment exercise to determine the weight of these value orientations on large groups of candidates to the entrance examination of the Division of Interpretation and Translation at Georgetown University, but do not report any findings. The self-assessment exercise is easy to administer and score. However, the first-person statements used may lead respondents unconsciously to assess themselves rather than the "typical"
Scribe or Actor?

translator or interpreter. Furthermore, as the language of Casse's self-assessment exercise is English, it cannot be excluded that some statements may have been misinterpreted by the beginners group in the present study.

Casse's questionnaire, which was used to analyze communication value orientation, consists of forty pairs of first-person statements which describe attitudes and personality traits. Respondents are asked to select in each pair the one they feel to be typical of their own personality. The statements are numbered consecutively 1 through 80; each statement is assigned to one of the four value orientations (action, process, people, idea), with 20 statements assigned to each orientation. To score the self-assessment exercise, the number of selected statements for each style is recorded, with all four styles adding up to 40 and a maximum score of 20 for any one value orientation. A balanced result would therefore be a score of 10 for each value orientation.

For the purpose of this study, the instruction was changed so that respondents were required to select in each pair of statements the one they would expect to hear from a translator resp. an interpreter. One half of the sample was asked to evaluate translators first, the other half began with the assessment of interpreters. In addition, respondents were requested to give information as to their age and gender and how long they had been students of translation and/or interpretation.

3. Literature review

Literature on the subject is scarce; there are, however, some articles, mostly by practising translators and interpreters, dealing with the personality structures of members of these professions. As early as 1949, Paulovsky (1949: 39 ff) worked out guidelines for aptitude tests, in which he included roughly 100 (!) criteria for the intellectual, moral, and practical qualities of candidates. At that time, no distinction was made between personality styles of translators and those of interpreters.

In the early eighties, a large-scale stress study was carried out among conference interpreters by Cooper et al. (1982). The outcome showed that interpreters tend to be slightly Type A oriented, a pattern of behaviour that implies the following personality factors: "extremes of competitiveness, striving for achievement, aggressiveness, haste, impatience, restlessness, hyperalertness, explosiveness of speech, tenseness of facial muscles, and feelings of being under pressure of time and under the challenge of responsibility" (Cooper et al. 1982: 102). However, interpreters' Type A orientation did not reach a particularly vulnerable risk level. Since the survey concentrated on stress rather than on
personality styles, it cannot be directly compared with Casse's value orientations.

3.1 Comparisons with Casse

In the following, an attempt is made to compare a selection of publications on personality traits of translators and interpreters with Casse's value orientation model.

3.1.1 Herbert

Herbert (1952:5) lists two basic qualities, apart from a good memory, required of interpreters: "a capacity for being passively receptive" and "quick-wittedness". He notes that although these two qualities "are not exceptionally rare, (...) their combination is very uncommon".

In terms of Casse's communication styles, this would point to a people orientation (receptive) and an action orientation (quick-wittedness) in interpreters.

3.1.2 Henschelmann

In an essay on the training of translators, Henschelmann (1974: 72) describes translating in the following way:

"a task between understanding, searching and producing which requires absolute concentration on the source text, conscientiousness, perception and empathy, linguistic sensitivity, thoroughness and responsibility in detail, an enquiring mind, persistence and endurance. It is sometimes coupled with stress and frustration and creates self-consciousness rather than elitarian feeling."

This would point to a people orientation (understanding, perception, empathy) and a process orientation (thoroughness, responsibility in detail) for translators.

Henschelmann's description is not the result of an empirical study but the outcome of her professional judgement.
3.1.3 Keiser

A few years later, Keiser (1979: 17) describes personal qualities of interpreters in a paper on the selection and training of interpreters. From his experience as a professional interpreter and professor at the University of Geneva, he includes the following personality requirements in his list:

(...) the faculty of analysis and synthesis, together with the ability to intuit meaning; the capacity to adapt immediately to subject matter, speakers, public, and conference situations; the ability to concentrate; good short- and long-term memory; a gift for public speaking and a pleasant voice; intellectual curiosity and intellectual probity; tact and diplomacy; above average physical endurance and good nerves.

All four of Casse's value orientations can be found in Keiser's description of interpreters, with a clear preponderance of people orientation (adapt immediately to speakers, public, and conference situations; a gift for public speaking and a pleasant voice; tact and diplomacy). Action orientation is represented in "to adapt immediately to subject matter", process orientation in "the faculty of analysis and synthesis", idea orientation in "intellectual curiosity".

3.1.4 Henderson (1980)

A personality survey was carried out by Henderson (1980) to compare the personality traits of a sample of interpreters with those of a sample of translators. All of the translators and interpreters participating in the survey worked for international organizations, most of them as permanent staff. The findings therefore reflect to a large degree the situation of staff translators and interpreters and not so much of free-lancers.

Based on responses to a question asking for a description of the "typical" translator, Henderson (1980:220) describes the "typical" translator as follows:

(...) a perfectionist, self-sufficient and fairly adaptable introvert, obviously interested in language and a range of other subjects, with limited ambition, liking routine, socially isolated and suffering from artistic frustration, who is at the same time a self-doubting, eccentric pedant!

The "typical" translator would therefore score rather low on action orientation (perfectionist, limited ambition, liking routine) and even lower on people orientation (introvert, socially isolated). The characteristics "interested in (...) a
range of other subjects" and "suffering from artistic frustration" seem to point to an idea orientation.

As regards the "typical" interpreter, Henderson (1980: 223) summarizes the responses to the relevant question as follows:

A self-reliant, articulate extrovert, quick and intelligent, a jack-of-all-trades and something of an actor, superficial, arrogant, liking variety and at times anxious and frustrated (...)

Action orientation (quick) and people orientation (extrovert, actor) are both apparent. Idea orientation could be deduced from "jack-of-all-trades" and "liking variety".

3.1.5 Henderson (1987)

In a more comprehensive personality survey, Henderson (1987: 67 ff) administered Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire to a sample of translators and interpreters. He identifies the resulting personality profile of translators as follows:

reserved, intelligent, affected by feeling, practical, humble, sober, conscientious, shy, apprehensive, conservative, self-sufficient, controlled, introverted, anxious, having tough poise, subdued.

Related to Casse's model, translators would score low on people orientation (reserved, shy, introverted) and high on process orientation (practical, sober, conscientious, controlled).

As regards interpreters, Henderson presents the following profile:

outgoing, intelligent, assertive, happy-go-lucky, venturesome, self-assured, experimenting, group-dependent, tense, extraversted, anxious, having tough poise, independent.

On Casse's scale, this would point to a strong people orientation (outgoing, group-dependent, extraverted) and to an action orientation (assertive, happy-go-lucky, venturesome).

3.1.6 Szuki

Another personality survey of translators and interpreters was carried out by Szuki (1988) at the University of Keio. His sample consisted only of so-called
well-adapted translators and interpreters, based on work experience, their estimation of the job and employers' judgements.

Szuki's findings suggest that translators are patient, cheerful, humorous and active. They are interested in arts, intercultural contact on the job and in daily life, and have an interest in looking after others (which requires a lot of patience) and voluntary work.

Related to Casse's four value orientations, translators have a process orientation (patient) and a strong people orientation (intercultural contact, looking after others). Action orientation is present (active), while idea orientation hardly exists, as Casse describes idea-oriented people as ego-centered, whereas Szuki's findings for translators include a strong interest for looking after others.

Interpreters, according to Szuki, are progressive, extrovert and have high achievement motives. At the same time, they are interested in verbal communication as well as mass communication and journalism, in social issues, physical labor and in deepening insight into people.

In terms of Casse's value orientations, interpreters therefore possess action orientation (high achievement motives) and strong people orientation (extrovert, social issues, etc.). Idea orientation is suggested by "progressive".

The above comparisons between existing literature on the personality profiles of translators and interpreters and Casse's value orientations are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2 below. As regards translators, an overall trend towards process orientation can be observed. Authors disagree on people orientation in translators. Whereas Henschelmann and Szuki consider it present, Henderson found the opposite trend in both his studies. Interpreters are attributed action orientation and strong people orientation.

Table 1: Translators' personality profile

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<td>People</td>
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<td>Idea</td>
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Table 2: Interpreters' personality profile

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<td>People</td>
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<td>Idea</td>
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</table>
3.2 Fortin

After this general review of previous findings and views held by experienced practitioners, teachers and researchers, an attempt will be made to analyze how beginner students of translation and interpretation see the two professional groups. The analysis is based on a diploma thesis which investigated sociodemographic data of beginner students at the Vienna Institute (Fortin 1992). Although the study did not primarily focus on personality traits of translators and interpreters, these can be deduced from questions regarding the skills students considered essential in the exercise of the two professions.

The evaluation of the answers to these questions suggests that translators are considered by beginner students to have action orientation, as they need quick reactions and the ability to grasp meaning immediately. Process orientation, evaluated on the basis of how important a scientific approach to problems was considered, was accorded low importance. In contrast, people orientation was strongly represented. In terms of idea orientation, assessed on the basis of reactions to the statement "I chose this course of study because it concentrates on practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge", aspiring translators scored slightly below average on a six-point scale.

Quick reactions and the ability to grasp meaning immediately were considered even more important for interpreters than for translators, suggesting an even higher action orientation. Process orientation was accorded as low an importance as for translators. Interpreters scored even higher than translators in terms of people orientation. However, they scored very low on idea orientation. This tendency is further corroborated by Fortin's finding that aspiring translators accorded much greater significance to the ability to abstract than did aspiring interpreters (Fortin 1992: 59).

Using the same legend as in Tables 1 and 2, Fortin's findings are represented in Table 3 below. As above, interpreters receive high scores on action orientation and people orientation. However, the personality profile of translators does not coincide with previous findings.

Table 3: Beginning students' views of translators and interpreters (Fortin 1992)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Translators</th>
<th>Interpreters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>● ●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

blank space: no prediction made
O orientation not present
● orientation present
●● strong presence of orientation
4. Questions and hypotheses

The study of the literature reviewed revealed a preponderance of *process* and *people orientation* among translators and of *action* and *people orientation* among interpreters. This leads to the following question:

- Will the results of the survey confirm the findings in the literature?

Assuming that the views of students of translation and interpretation may change in the course of their studies, as they are exposed to theory and practical training, another question may be raised:

- Will beginners and advanced students differ in their views of the "typical" translator and interpreter?

On the assumption that Casse's value orientations and questionnaire have any validity in this respect and on the basis of the above questions, the following hypotheses may be established:

(1) The results of the survey will reflect the views expressed in the literature.
(2) Beginners and advanced students may differ in their views of the "typical" translator and interpreter, with the latter's view corresponding more closely to the literature.

5. Description of samples

5.1 Beginners

The sample of beginner students consisted of participants in an introductory class required of all students, aiming at communicating basic theoretical and professional knowledge on translation and interpreting. This class was chosen on the assumption that participants would be at the very beginning of their studies and have little prior knowledge of translation and interpreting, i.e. they would be largely unaware of studies carried out hitherto on the personality traits of translators and interpreters.

Of the 57 questionnaires returned by this group, 26 were eliminated for several reasons. Six of these questionnaires were not taken into consideration because the respondents were in their 4th or higher semester of study; it was assumed that they would already have been confronted with information and experiences that might influence their views of translators and interpreters. One respondent failed to indicate the number of semesters he/she had been studying.
19 questionnaires had not been completed; omissions ranged from one unanswered pair of statements to whole pages missing.

Of the remaining 31 respondents, 27 were female and three were male; one respondent failed to indicate gender. The average age was 19.63 years; one respondent did not indicate age. The average number of semesters was 1.26. One respondent did not indicate a number of semesters, but was assumed to be near the beginning of her studies on the basis of her age (20).

5.2 **Advanced students**

The sample of advanced students consisted of participants in a medium-level consecutive interpretation class, an advanced class in simultaneous interpretation and an advanced translation class.

Of the 42 questionnaires returned by this group, three were not taken into account for evaluation because they were incomplete. Of the remaining 39 respondents, 32 were female and 6 were male; one respondent failed to indicate gender. The average age was 24.21 years; again, no data were available for one respondent. The average number of semesters was 8.89; one respondent failed to give relevant information, while another indicated that she had completed graduate studies in translation.

6. **Results of the survey**

6.1 **Translators**

Table 4 and Figure 2 compare beginners' and advanced students' assessment of translators. Both sample groups scored translators highest at *process orientation*. Beginners assessed translators' process orientation at 11.452; advanced students gave them 13.077. The difference between the two groups was significant (*p* = 0.05).

The assessment of all other orientations yielded no significant difference. As regards *action orientation*, beginners and advanced students both scored translators below 10, with beginners giving them 9.258 and advanced students giving them 8.231.

Beginners' and advanced students' assessment of *people orientation* in translators did not differ significantly, at 9.29 and 9.359 resp.

In terms of *idea orientation*, translators received a score of 10 from beginners and a score of 9.333 from advanced students.
Table 4: Translators as assessed by beginners and advanced students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginners</th>
<th></th>
<th>Advanced</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>St.dev.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>St.dev.</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>9.258</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>8.231</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>11.452</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>13.077</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>s. (p = 0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>9.359</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>9.333</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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</table>

6.2 Interpreters

As can be seen from Table 5 and Figure 3, both sample groups scored people orientation in interpreters above 10, with beginners giving them 10.968 and advanced students giving them 11.795. The difference was not significant.

A significant difference (p = 0.01) was obtained for action orientation, where beginners gave interpreters 9.839, while advanced students accorded them 11.692, the second highest score accorded to interpreters in the survey.

The rating of interpreters for process orientation was low. Advanced students gave them 7.128, the lowest result in the entire survey, while beginners gave them 9.516, the difference being significant (p = 0.01).

As regards idea orientation, interpreters received a score of 9.677 from beginners and a score of 9.359 from advanced students.
Table 5: Interpreters as assessed by beginners and advanced students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginners</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St.dev.</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
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<tr>
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<td>11.692</td>
<td>2.72</td>
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<td>7.128</td>
<td>2.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>10.968</td>
<td>3.04</td>
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<td>11.795</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idea</td>
<td>9.677</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.359</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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Figure 3: Interpreters as assessed by beginners and advanced students

6.3 Differences between translators and interpreters as perceived by beginners

As shown in Table 6, beginners' assessment of process orientation differed significantly (p = 0.05) for translators and interpreters (11.452 and 9.516 resp.).

The difference was also significant (p = 0.05) as regards people orientation (translators: 9.29; interpreters: 10.968).

Beginners' assessment of idea and action orientation did not differ significantly for the two professional groups.

Table 6: Beginners' assessment of translators and interpreters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Translators</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St.dev.</th>
<th>Interpreters</th>
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<td>9.677</td>
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6.4 Differences between translators and interpreters as perceived by advanced students

As can be seen from Table 7, there was a significant difference \( p = 0.01 \) in advanced students' assessment of *process orientation* in translators (13.077) and interpreters (7.128).

The difference was also significant \( p = 0.01 \) as regards *people orientation* (translators: 9.359; interpreters: 11.795).

Unlike the sample group of beginners, advanced students also accorded significantly different scores \( p = 0.01 \) to the two professional groups for *action orientation* (translators: 8.231; interpreters: 11.692).

The only value orientation where advanced students saw no difference between translators and interpreters was *idea orientation* (9.333 and 9.359 resp.).

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<th>Difference</th>
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<td>s. ( p = 0.01 )</td>
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7. Discussion of results

7.1 Comparison of results to the literature

The results of the survey may be said to be very much in line with the views expressed by the authors reviewed, who see translators as predominantly *process* and *people oriented*, and interpreters as *people* and *action oriented*. This is borne out by the results obtained from both sample groups, beginners and advanced students. They, too, consider *people* and *action orientation* to be the most characteristic features of interpreters, a finding also obtained in Fortin's study. Both samples in this study see translators as mainly *process* and *people oriented*, while beginners in Fortin's study scored translators high on *action* and *people orientation* and failed to see their *process orientation*.

However, a more detailed analysis of the results for translators shows that the students in the two samples place even greater weight on *process orientation* than the authors reviewed. Both beginners and advanced students attributed the highest score for *process*. As regards *action* and *idea*, the students in the two samples give low to medium scores. The authors make hardly any reference to these two value orientations, an obvious sign that they do not consider them important. With respect to *people orientation*, Suzuki is the only author who places greater weight on this orientation.
As for interpreters, the authors reviewed give predominance to *people* and *action orientation*, with basically no mention of *process* and *idea*. This contrasts with the views expressed by beginner students in this study, who attribute almost the same weight to *process* and *idea* as to *action orientation*. Of the authors reviewed, Keiser is the only one to accord medium or strong weight to all four value orientations. Both samples of students see interpreters as predominantly *people oriented*.

### 7.2 Differences between beginners and advanced students

It was assumed that there might be differences in the views expressed by beginners and advanced students and that the views of the latter would show greater correspondence with the literature reviewed.

With regard to translators (see Table 4), this hypothesis has been largely confirmed by the survey. There is only one significant difference between the two samples of students: the advanced students accorded a much higher *process* score than the beginners' group, which ties in with the views of the authors reviewed. One explanation could be that the advanced students have been exposed to a number of courses in translation theory, textual analysis, textual criticism, etc. so that they have come better to understand the *process* nature of translation; thus, they consider a *process orientation* essential for translators. Another difference, which is, however, not significant, concerns *people orientation*. The advanced students rank it second, whereas the beginners see it as the third most important value orientation. One possible explanation may be that, as part of their studies, the advanced students have developed an understanding for the *people* element in translators' lives (having to negotiate with clients, talking to experts to obtain information, etc.) instead of seeing them as people secluded in an ivory tower, surrounded only by books.

As far as interpreters (see Table 5) are concerned, two significant differences may be identified between beginners and advanced students. For one thing, the advanced students attribute greater importance to *action*. A reasonable explanation would be that the latter have been sensitized towards an understanding of the actual interpreting process and its *action* elements. In fact, their assessment comes closer to the views found in the literature.

The second significant difference regards *process orientation*, which the advanced students consider far less important than the beginners do. Again, the explanation might be that, because of their training, advanced students distinguish more clearly between the skills required of translators and interpreters. *Process* is associated with translation, *action* with interpretation.
8. Conclusions

The two hypotheses (see 4.) have been largely confirmed by the findings of the survey. Using Casse's questionnaire, this empirical study has shown that the typical translator is seen as predominantly process and people oriented, whereas the typical interpreter is considered to be people and action oriented; however, other orientations should not be neglected, as both translators and interpreters have been shown to have fairly balanced communication values.

Figure 4: Advanced students' assessment of translators and interpreters

Admittedly, it may be argued that the survey and large parts of the literature reviewed reflect but stereotype views of translators and interpreters. To attempt a more complex personality profile study would have gone beyond the scope of this paper. We are also aware of the fact that any model of personality orientations involves the risk of simplification. As M. Bowen (1994: 189) rightly points out, we should "beware of oversimplifications," as "[the] introvert translator would have a hard time dealing with clients and the extrovert interpreter is certain to find social contacts at work rather restricted."

Certainly, it would be interesting to compare the views and findings presented in this paper with the actual personality profiles of a sample of practising translators and interpreters. Therefore, we suggest that Casse's questionnaire be administered to a sample of representatives of these two professions in order to see how their scores compare with the views held by the two samples of students and the authors reviewed.

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Bibliography


