

## A preliminary study to conceptualize professionalism in the field of veterinary medicine\*

### Veteriner hekimliğinde profesyonelizmi kavramsallaştırmaya yönelik bir ön çalışma

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**Introduction:** Although the concept of professionalism is widely used in all over the world, there is no clear definition that describes exactly what it is. This is thought to result from different meanings which are attributed to the concept of profession. The number of researches and publications on medical professionalism has increased rapidly in recent years. In this sources some definitions reveal a detailed list of keywords. Compared with medicine, veterinary medicine has still got limited studies on this subject. This research was carried out to determine how veterinarians conceptualize professionalism in the field of veterinary medicine.

**Methods:** This qualitative study was designed as an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The sample was consisted of veterinarians who have carried out their duties at the Veterinary School of Ankara University. The sampling strategy was purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews then content analysis was applied. During this process, internal and external consistencies were checked with an expert's help. As a result of the analysis the meaning units were created and classified. Results were shown in the tables, interpreted and then discussed.

**Results:** In this study it is found that veterinary and human medicines have many common terms for conceptualization of professionalism. Veterinary professionalism were conceptualized with similar approaches by experienced and inexperienced veterinarians. Ethics and moral values were expressed primarily and together in participant's approaches to this concept. The definition of good veterinarians is generally consistent with the definition of veterinary professionalism.

**Discussion And Conclusion:** Compared with medicine, veterinary medicine has still got limited studies about professionalism. This research shows that veterinarians conceptualize professionalism by using some terms and explanations related to some values and desired behaviors of which many of them are also used for conceptualize medical professionalism. Among them ethics-moral values have been given priority. These values and behaviours are also referred for the definition of good veterinarian. There is no doubt that the meaning units; which were given in this study are not enough for the definition of veterinary professionalism. However, these units offer a good starting point for similar works to be done in the near future.

**Keywords:** Ethical-moral values, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), professional experience, veterinary professionalism

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**Giriş ve Amaç:** Profesyonizm kavramı tüm dünyada yaygın olarak kullanılsa da, ne olduğuna dair açık bir tanım bulunmamaktadır. Bu durumun meslek kavramına yüklenen farklı anlamlardan kaynaklandığı düşünülmektedir. Tıbbi profesyonizme ilişkin araştırma ve yayınların sayısında son yıllarda hızlı bir artış yaşanmakta; bu kaynaklardaki bazı tanımlar ayrıntılı bir anahtar kelime listesini ortaya koymaktadır. Veteriner hekimliğinde bu konudaki çalışmalar insan hekimliği ile karşılaştırıldığında hala sınırlı sayıda kalmıştır. Bu araştırma, veteriner hekimliği alanında veteriner hekimlerin profesyonizmi nasıl kavramsallaştırdıklarını tanımlamak amacıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir.

**Yöntem ve Gereçler:** Bu nitel araştırma Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz olarak tasarlanmıştır. Örnekleme, Ankara Üniversitesi Veteriner Fakültesi'nde çalışan veteriner hekimler yer almıştır. Örnekleme stratejisi olarak amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi seçilmiştir. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanmış, daha sonra içerik analizi uygulanmıştır. Bu işlem sırasında bir uzman yardımıyla iç ve dış tutarlıklar kontrol edilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda anlam üniteleri oluşturulmuş ve sınıflandırılmıştır. Bulgular tablolar halinde gösterilmiş ve yorumlanarak tartışılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Bu çalışmada, veteriner hekimliği ve insan hekimliğinde profesyonizm kavramını tanımlamak için kullanılan birçok ortak terim olduğu saptanmıştır. Veteriner hekimliğinde profesyonizm deneyimli ve deneyimsiz veteriner hekimler tarafından benzer yaklaşımlarla kavramsallaştırılmıştır. Katılımcıların bu kavrama yaklaşımlarında etik ve ahlaki değerler öncelikli olarak ve birlikte ifade edilmiştir. İyi veteriner hekim tanımının genel olarak veteriner hekimliğinde profesyonizm tanımıyla uyumlu olduğu gözlenmiştir.

**Tartışma ve Sonuç:** İnsan hekimliği ile karşılaştırıldığında, veteriner hekimliğinde profesyonizm kavramı ile ilgili sınırlı sayıda çalışma mevcuttur. Bu çalışma, veteriner hekimlerin profesyonizmi; çoğunlukla tıbbi profesyonizmi tanımlamak için kullanılan birtakım değerler ve beklenen davranışlarla ilgili bazı terim ve açıklamalar kullanarak kavramsallaştırdıklarını göstermiştir. Bunların arasında etik ve ahlaki değerlere öncelik verilmiştir. Bu değerlere ve davranışlara iyi veteriner hekimin tanımlanmasında da atıfta bulunulmuştur. Kuşkusuz, bu çalışmada verilen anlam ünitelerini veteriner hekimliğinde profesyonizmi tanımlamak için yeterli değildir. Ancak bu ünitelerin, gelecekte yapılacak benzer çalışmalar için iyi bir başlangıç noktası oldukları da kabul edilmelidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Etik-ahlaki değerler, mesleki deneyim, veteriner hekimliğinde profesyonizm, Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz

## INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of “professionalism” is widely used all over the world today, there is no clear definition that describes exactly what it is. This is thought to result from different meanings which are attributed to the concept of profession, the origin of professionalism.

In Oxford English Dictionary (1), profession is “an occupation in which a professed knowledge of some subject, field, or science is applied; a vocation or career, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification” and it is emphasized that in the past, this was generally applied to divinity, law and medicine. Professional is described as “relating to or belonging to a profession” (1). In today's languages, this word has occasionally used as synonymous with occupation. Moline (2) argues that all occupations are trying to become professionalised. He describes the existence of a desire to move away from the amateur status and be “honoured” with the label of professional. Thistlethwaite and Spencer (3) discuss other understanding of the word professional – as the opposite of amateur, therefore possessing superior skills which are worth paying

for such as in sport or music, and also when it is used to describe a job which is carried out “with calculated efficiency without fuss or emotion”.

Professionalism has become one of the most common concepts in medical education over the past 20 years in the world (4–11). While it was conceptually discussed in the past, it has become a field of competence in graduate and postgraduate medical curricula today. The number of researches and publications on medical professionalism has also increased rapidly in recent years. According to medical literature (5), individuals and institutions generally give short and precise definitions of professionalism; include three or four features to define medical professionalism. But in some resources (7–10,12), some definitions reveal a detailed list of keywords such as altruism (absence of self-interest), accountability, integrity, excellence (commitment to life-long learning), service, respect for others; additional humanistic qualities; honesty, scientific knowledge, duty, communication skills, personal values, ethical behaviour, moral values, responsibility to profession, decision making, manners, empathy, confidence and knowing limits, efficiency, trustworthy, collaboration, technical competency.

Compared with medicine, veterinary medicine has still got limited studies (12–20) on this subject, no true definition of veterinary professionalism exists and the teaching of the values and behaviors expected of veterinary professionals may not be explicit.

As a preliminary study, this qualitative research was carried out to determine how veterinarians conceptualize professionalism in the field of veterinary medicine with the sample of veterinarians from the Veterinary School of Ankara University.

## MATERIAL-METHODS

### Design of the study

At the beginning of this study, related literature was detailly reviewed and the subject was carefully consulted with the experts from the field of social sciences. As a result, this study was designed as an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which has been developed as a distinctive approach to conducting qualitative researches.

### Sample

The sample was consisted of veterinarians who have carried out their duties at the Veterinary School of Ankara University. The sampling strategy was purposive sampling since it ensures a homogenous sample of participants with common characteristics and experiences (21).

### Data collection

In order to collect data, a guide for semi-structured interviews, which deeply expose experiences and provide researchers both flexibility and ease of interaction, were developed. At the first step, a draft form - focused on sociodemographic characteristics, professional experiences, conceptualization of professionalism and definitions of “good” and “bad” veterinarian respectively - prepared with the help of the experts. Six veterinarians were interviewed in order to test whether the form work or not during interviews. In accordance with the views and critics the form had its final content.

At the beginning of the interviews, the aim and the method of this study was clearly explained to the participants, in addition they were informed that the interviews were recorded and the responses would be

kept confidential. Their written permissions were taken. Then the interviews were begun. The average time for each was 30 minutes. Interviews continued as long as data diversity persisted. Thus 35 interviews were realized.

### **Limitations**

For this research a number of sociodemographic features such as age, gender, service field, qualification of professional experience, professional title were also collected. But both researchers were not familiar with the method of this study and there were not enough publications to guide. So for this preliminary study, the hypothesis was formed as “*professionalism is positively affected by professional experience*”. That is why only professional experience was considered in the conceptualization of professionalism and other features were excluded for further studies. In addition, as the aim of this research was to determine the meaning units, which were used by participant veterinarians during the conceptualisation of professionalism, discussions and comments were carried out in general framework and meaning units were not discussed separately.

### **Data analysis**

Data was applied content analysis. For this aim each interview was electronically transcribed and coded. Regarding related literature and similar IPA studies (5,21–23), each author separately read the transcript of the first interview as a whole then completed a line-by-line analysis of the transcript to code for the participant’s experiences based on the research questions. By this way, each author separately organized coded texts into inductive themes. After this process, each coding scheme was compared to discuss similarities and differences as Patton (24) informed. Discussions continued until an agreed set of themes and supporting quotes were identified. As a result, a consensus chart of codes (a thematic code list) was created. During this process, internal and external consistencies were checked with an expert’s help. This procedure was applied for all transcripts. Then the “*meaning units*” (key words/key sentences) were created and classified according to junior and senior veterinarians’ responses and results were shown in the tables, interpreted and then discussed. Local legislation (Law Nr: 6343, Official Newspaper Nr: 8661, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1954) was taken into consideration for the definition of junior and senior veterinarians. Accordingly, veterinarians with at least 15 years of professional experience and for this reason have right to be elected to the Higher Honour Council of the Turkish Veterinary Medical Association were accepted as “*senior*”. And those with less experience than 15 years were called as “*junior*”.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The sample of this research had been enriched as much as possible with the participation of individuals in different views. During the preparation process of the form for semi-structured interviews, related literature was detailly inspected and the process was consulted with supported by the experts from different fields. The consistency between the research question, purpose and data collection tools was constantly taken into account. It had been constantly examined whether the meaning units (key words and key sentences) were consistent with each other and with the thematic codes in the list. Records and transcriptions have been kept in the archive.

## **RESULTS**

The researchers of the study interviewed totally 35 veterinarians. Thirteen of all participants *had less than 10 years experience*, 7 had 10-20 years, 7 had 20-30 years, 5 had 30-40 years and 3 had over 40 years relevant

work experience. In general, 18 of them had *less than 15 years* experience (junior veterinarians) and 17 had more than 15 years experience (senior veterinarians). The most inexperienced participant was VET11 with two years experience and the most experienced participant was VET2 with 44 years experience in the profession (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Personal characteristics of participants

Professional Experiences							
Less than 10 years		10 to 20 years		21 to 30 years		31 and more years	
Codes of Veterinarians	Years	Codes of Veterinarians	Years	Codes of Veterinarians	Years	Codes of Veterinarians	Years
VET 3	8						
VET 5	7						
VET 6	6	VET 4	13	VET 16	28	VET 1	42
VET 7	8	VET 12	14	VET 19	24	VET 2	44
VET 9	6	VET 13	12	VET 20	26	VET 8	39
VET 10	8	VET 14	16	VET 21	22	VET 15	40
VET 11	2	VET 25	12	VET 23	26	VET 17	40
VET 22	3	VET 26	10	VET 30	23	VET 18	42
VET 24	4	VET 33	19	VET 32	27	VET 31	33
VET 27	6					VET 34	37
VET 28	7						
VET 29	3						
VET 35	5						

Table 2 shows the *meaning units*, which were created by taking into account the participants' definitions about professionalism. As it can be seen in the Table, the majority of both junior and senior veterinarians' definitions (total number:  $n_t=14$ ) were related to the *meaning unit* with the title "ethical-moral values".

The equal number of junior and senior participants' definitions were related to the *meaning units* with the titles "professional responsibilities" (number of juniors:  $n_j=5$ ; number of seniors:  $n_s=5$ ), "specialisation" ( $n_j=4$ ,  $n_s=4$ ), "competency" ( $n_j=1$ ,  $n_s=1$ ), "respectful to animals and animal rights" ( $n_j=1$ ,  $n_s=1$ ) and "communication" ( $n_j=1$ ,  $n_s=1$ ).

Apart from common definitions, only one junior vet's (VET6) definition was related to "objectivity" and two senior vets' (VET1 and VET20) definitions were related to "respectful to animal owners" and "free thinking".

**Table 2:** Definition of veterinary professionalism

Meaning Units	Junior Vets (Experiences ≤ 15 years)	Senior Vets (Experiences ≥ 15 years)	Total (n)
ethical - moral values	n=8 (VET 3-5-7-10-11-25-26-29)	n=6 (VET 2-15-16-18-23-31)	14
professional responsibilities	n=5 (VET 4-5-7-10-25)	n=5 (VET 2-16-21-23-34)	10
professional improvement	n=5 (VET 4-11-27-28-29)	n=4 (VET 14-16-32-33)	9
qualification and technical skills	n=5 (VET 4-6-22-26-35)	n=3 (VET 8-20-23)	8
specialisation	n=4 (VET 9-24-27-12)	n=4 (VET 14-17-30-32)	8
scientific attitude	n=2 (VET 3-10)	n=4 (VET 1-18-19-21)	6
competency	n=1 (VET 13)	n=1 (VET 32)	2
respectful to animals and animal rights	n=1 (VET 25)	n=1 (VET 18)	2
communication	n=1 (VET 29)	n=1 (VET 8)	2
objectivity	n=1 (VET 6)	-	1
respectful to animal owners	-	n=1 (VET 20)	1
free thinking	-	n=1 (VET 1)	1

The *meaning units*, created by taking into account the participants' answers to the question about "the most important features of veterinary professionalism" are given in Table 3. As can be seen in the Table, the responses of 10 participants, junior and senior, were about "ethical-moral values". As for other *meaning units*, it was seen that the responses related to "qualification and competency" ( $n_t=7$ ) and "scientific attitude" ( $n_t=6$ ) were more privileged than others. While the responses related to the *meaning unit* "respect for the profession" ( $n_t=3$ ), "professional knowledge and skills" (VET11 and VET27) and "education" (VET13) were stated by only junior veterinarians; the responses related to the *meaning units* "respects for living creatures", "get the fruits of labor" and "experience" were stated by only seniors (VET20, VET2, and VET23).

VET30 misunderstood the question in this part, and answered as if the question was "what are the fields of veterinary medicine". During interviews, the responses were not manipulated by researchers. VET30 was not insisted on changing his response; so his answer was not evaluated in this section.

**Table 3:** The most important features of veterinary professionalism

Meaning Units	Junior Vets (Experiences ≤ 15 years)	Senior Vets (Experiences ≥ 15 years)	Total (n)
ethical - moral values	<b>n=5</b> (VET 3-7-12-25-29)	<b>n=5</b> (VET 14-15-16-17-32)	10
qualification and competency	<b>n=4</b> (VET 4-9-24-26)	<b>n=3</b> (VET 8-19-31)	7
scientific attitude	<b>n=2</b> (VET 28-35)	<b>n=4</b> (VET 18-21-33-34)	6
respect for the profession	<b>n=3</b> (VET 5-10-22)	-	3
objectivity	<b>n=1</b> (VET 6)	<b>n=1</b> (VET 1)	2
professional knowledge and skills	<b>n=2</b> (VET 11-27)	-	2
education	<b>n=1</b> (VET 13)	-	1
respect for living creatures	-	<b>n=1</b> (VET 20)	1
get the fruits of labor	-	<b>n=1</b> (VET 2)	1

Table 4 and Table 5 show the *meaning units* which were created by taking into account the participants' definitions about "good veterinarian" and "bad veterinarian" respectively. As it is seen in Table 4; according to majorities; a good veterinarian "is faithful to professional and ethical principles" ( $n_i=16$ ) and "maintains professional improvement" ( $n_i=14$ ). Amongst juniors responses, there were no definitions about respectfulness, taking responsibility and involving in professional organisations, and amongst senior responses there were no definitions about reliability and honesty, altruism, communication skills and non-discrimination.

**Table 4:** Definition of a “good” veterinarian

Meaning Units	Junior Vets (Experiences ≤ 15 years)	Senior Vets (Experiences ≥ 15 years)	Total (n)
is faithful to professional and ethical principles	<b>n=10</b> (VET 3-6-7-10-12-13-25-26-28-35)	<b>n=6</b> (VET 14-15-16-21-31-34)	16
maintains professional improvement	<b>n=8</b> (VET 3-5-9-12-13-24-25-26)	<b>n=6</b> (VET 17-19-23-30-33-34)	14
has qualifications and competencies	<b>n=2</b> (VET 4-27)	<b>n=6</b> (VET 1-14-18-20-23-30)	8
gives importance to professional interests	<b>n=3</b> (VET 7-11-26)	<b>n=1</b> (VET 16)	4
is specialist	<b>n=2</b> (VET 24-28)	<b>n=2</b> (VET 31-32)	4
is non-greed	<b>n=1</b> (VET 25)	<b>n=2</b> (VET 8-31)	3
is animal lover	<b>n=1</b> (VET 13)	<b>n=2</b> (VET 15-20)	3
is utilitarian	<b>n=1</b> (VET 3)	<b>n=1</b> (VET 8)	2
is reliable and honest	<b>n=2</b> (VET 25-29)	-	2
is altruistic	<b>n=1</b> (VET 5)	-	1
is respectful	-	<b>n=1</b> (VET 18)	1
takes responsibility	-	<b>n=1</b> (VET 2)	1
has communication skills	<b>n=1</b> (VET 28)	-	1
does not discriminate	<b>n=1</b> (VET 22)	-	1
is involved in professional organizations	-	<b>n=1</b> (VET 34)	1

And as it is seen in Table 5; according to *majority of junior veterinarians* a bad veterinarian “*is a person who paid attention to fees*” ( $n_j=9$ ); and according to *majority of senior veterinarians* a bad veterinarian “*is a person who was not competent in scientific, technical and social aspects*” ( $n_s=9$ ). It is also noticed that the same number of junior and senior veterinarians agreed that a bad veterinarian “*is a person who acted unethically*” ( $n_j=6$ ,  $n_s=5$ ). Apart from common definitions; while “*disrespectfulness to nature*” was expressed by only one senior veterinarian (VET20), “*discrimination*”, “*uncompassion*” and “*biased*” were stated by only three different junior veterinarians (VET22, VET7 and VET6).

**Table 5:** Definition of a “bad” veterinarian

Meaning Units	Junior Vets (Experiences ≤ 15 years)	Senior Vets (Experiences ≥ 15 years)	Total (n)
pays attention to fees	n=9 (VET 3-4-7-9-11-12-25-27-29)	n=5 (VET 2-15-16-18-32)	14
is not competent in scientific, technical and social aspects	n=3 (VET 5-10-26)	n=9 (VET 8-14-18-20-23-30-31-33-34)	12
acts unethically	n=6 (VET 5-12-13-24-26-35)	n=5 (VET 14-17-19-31-34)	11
abuses his knowledge and skills	n=5 (VET 6-7-10-26-29)	n=1 (VET 21)	6
harms to professional dignity	n=2 (VET 9-24)	n=3 (VET 8-18-19)	5
is smarty-pants	n=1 (VET 27)	n=1 (VET 1)	2
is disrespectful to nature	-	n=1 (VET 20)	1
does discriminate	n=1 (VET 22)	-	1
is uncompassion	n=1 (VET 7)	-	1
is biased	n=1 (VET 6)	-	1

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Mıdık and Batı (4) informed that Castellani and Hafferty have accepted medical professionalism as a new and complex system that is influenced by internal factors such as motivation, stress, character traits and external factors such as institutional politics and practice environment and they have defined seven professionalism dimensions. In their article these authors also emphasize that they could not access detailed forms similar to Castellani and Hafferty’s research and they conceptualized professionalism in three dimensions with subtitles. Similar dimensions were not preferred by the researchers of this study. Because the emotional and service dimensions of veterinary medicine are very varied due to diversities of animal species; approaches to animals and social statuses attributed to them. Nevertheless, this study displays many similarities between the meaning units of this study and the subtitles of dimensions in other studies (4,5,9) related to medical professionalism. Regarding this situation, it can be said that veterinary medicine and human medicine have many common terms for conceptualize professionalism in their own fields. Therefore, human medical field helps us see beyond rules and behaviors as the foundation for professionalism in veterinary medicine as Mossop (15) underlined.

While the study was being planned, it was assumed that the professional experience would affect positively the conceptualization of professionalism. However, this research shown that there was general consistency between *meaning units* derived from conceptualizations of professionalism by junior and senior veterinarians. In other words professionalism were conceptualized with similar approaches by junior and senior veterinarians. So the result makes it difficult to establish a direct connection between professionalism and experience. At this point, it has also become obscure whether 15 years was a good choice to distinguish the experience or not. At the end of the study, the authors have agreed one more time that the quality of working period was more important than the quantity. However, they have been loyal to their records while preparing the tables.

As it is shown in the results that majority (totally 14) of both junior and senior veterinarians' definitions of professionalism were related to the *meaning unit* "ethical-moral values". It is thought that participants may have considered the researchers' scientific field in responding to this question. On the other hand it may also be due to the increasing popularity of ethics in the field of veterinary medicine in recent years too (25). But there are no concrete evidences to confirm either of these two possibilities. In addition; it is also seen that ethics and moral values were expressed together in participant's approaches to veterinary professionalism. The distinction between ethics and morals is particularly important for ethicists and there are many academic publications (26–29) on this issue. But apart from ethicists, these two terms are generally used interchangeably by others in daily life.

Similar to ethics, communication skills has also taken place among the most popular topics of veterinary medicine today. In many publications (7,8,12,30), it is constantly pointed out that communication skills is related to professional excellence. For this reason, it is thought to be strange that this skill was expressed by very few veterinarians.

It is shown in this article that 7 of 10 *meaning units* that the researchers used in Table 3 are same as, similar with or related to the 8 of 12 *meaning units* in Table 2. Table 3, actually was prepared only for checking the internal consistency of this research and for pointing out to show this consistency, it was given here in the article.

Participants' definition of good veterinarians in this study is generally consistent with the definition of veterinary professionalism. In internet scans, it is seen that "good" and "professional" definitions are used together in many announcements and advertisement related to veterinarians and veterinary medicine.

While the most referenced title was "faithfulness to professional and ethical principles" in the definition of good veterinarian in this study; "unethically acts" were the third most preferred title in the definition of bad veterinarian. According to most of the participants a bad veterinarian "is the person who pays attention to fees". Veterinarians of course are entitled to charge fees for their professional services and this subject has been detailly scrutinized in social media. Here, it is thought that this situation was expressed as a malicious advantage.

**In conclusion**, compared with medicine, veterinary medicine has still got limited studies about professionalism. This research shows that veterinarians conceptualize professionalism by using some terms and explanations related to some values and desired behaviors of which many of them are also used for conceptualize medical professionalism. Among them ethics have been given priority. These values and behaviours are also refered for the definition of good veterinarian. There is no doubt that the meaning units; which were given in this study are not enough for the definition of veterinary professionalism. However, these units offer a good starting point for similar works to be done in the near future.

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