

Professionalism in turbulent times: challenges to and opportunities for professionalism as an occupational value

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The sociological analysis of professional work has differentiated professionalism as a special means of organizing work and controlling workers. After clarifying the three concepts of profession, professionalization and professionalism, the paper continues with a section on professionalism, its history and current developments. The second section considers the main challenges to, and the third section the opportunities for, professionalism as an occupational value and for this category of professional practitioners and employees in the labour market.

Introduction

For a long time, the sociological analysis of professional work has differentiated professionalism as a special means of organizing work and controlling workers and in contrast to the hierarchical, bureaucratic and managerial controls of industrial and commercial organizations. But professional work is changing and being changed as increasingly professionals (such as doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers) now work in employing organizations; lawyers and accountants in large professional service firms (PSFs) and sometimes in international and commercial organizations; pharmacists in national (retailing) companies; and engineers, journalists, performing artists, the armed forces and police find occupational control of their work and discretionary decision-making increasingly difficult to maintain and sustain.

In sociological research on professional groups, three concepts have been used extensively in the development of explanations: profession, professionalization, professionalism. The concept of profession represents a distinct and generic category

of occupational work. Definitions of 'profession' have been frequently attempted, but sociologists have been unsuccessful in clarifying the differences between professions and other occupations and identifying what makes professions distinctive. Definitions of professions as institutional remain unresolved, though particular generic occupational groups continue to form the case studies in which to examine and test sociological theories and explanations.

The concept of professionalization is regarded as the process to achieve the status of profession and has been interpreted as the process to pursue, develop and maintain the closure of the occupational group in order to maintain practitioners' own occupational self-interests in terms of their salary, status and power, as well as the monopoly protection of the occupational jurisdiction (Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988). This interpretation was prominent in the field in the 1970s and 1980s and was associated with a critique of professions as ideological constructs (Johnson, 1972).

This interpretation has declined in popularity recently although sociologists interested in gender issues and differences continue to critique the idea of profession as a gendered (historical) construct (Davies, 1995; Witz, 1992). Also the concept of professionalization continues to be important in the analysis of newly emerging occupations (e.g. IT consultancy, human resources management, psychology and social care work) perhaps seeking status and recognition for the importance of the work often by standardization of the education, training and qualification for practice (Brint, 2001; Ruiz Ben, 2009).

A third concept is professionalism which has had a long history in the disciplinary sub-field. Professionalism was usually interpreted as an occupational or normative

value, as something worth preserving and promoting in work and by and for workers. Then later developments interpreted professionalism as a discourse and to an extent this has combined the occupational value and the ideological interpretations. Certainly there are real advantages in the analysis of professionalism as the key analytical concept in explanations and interpretations about professional knowledge-based work, occupations and practitioners.

The paper begins with a section on the concept of professionalism, its history and current developments. The second section considers the main challenges to, and the third section the main opportunities for, professionalism as an occupational value and for this category of knowledge-based practitioners and employees in the labour market.

Professionalism as an occupational value: history and current developments

In early British sociological analysis, the key concept was 'professionalism' and the emphasis was on the importance of professionalism for the stability and civility of social systems (e.g. Tawney, 1921; Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Marshall, 1950). Tawney perceived professionalism as a force capable of controlling rampant individualism to work for the needs of the community. Carr-Saunders and Wilson saw professionalism as a force for stability and freedom against the threat of encroaching industrial and governmental bureaucracies. Marshall emphasized altruism or the 'service' orientation of professionalism and how professionalism might form a bulwark against threats to stable democratic processes. In these interpretations professionalism was regarded as an important and highly desirable occupational value and professional relations were characterized as collegial, co-operative and mutually supportive. Similarly, relations of trust characterized practitioner-client and practitioner-management interactions since competencies were assumed to be guaranteed by education, training and sometimes by licensing.

The early American sociological theorists of professions also developed similar interpretations and again the key concept was the occupational value of professionalism based on trust, competence, a

strong occupational identity and co-operation. The best known, though perhaps most frequently misquoted, attempt to clarify the special characteristics of professionalism, its central values and its contribution to social order and stability, was that of Parsons (1939). Parsons recognized and was one of the first theorists to show how the capitalist economy, the rational-legal social order (of Weber), and the modern professions were all interrelated and mutually balancing in the maintenance and stability of a fragile normative social order. He demonstrated how the authority of the professions and of bureaucratic hierarchical organizations both rested on the same principles (for example of functional specificity, restriction of the power domain, application of universalistic, impersonal standards). The professions, however, by means of their collegial organization and shared identity, demonstrated an alternative approach (compared with the managerial hierarchy of bureaucratic organizations) towards the shared normative end.

The work of Parsons in general has subsequently been subject to heavy criticism mainly because of its links with functionalism (Dingwall and Lewis, 1983). The differences between professionalism and rational-legal, bureaucratic ways of organizing work have been returned to, however, in Freidson's (2001) final analysis. Freidson examined the logics of three different ways of organizing work in contemporary societies (the market, organization and profession) and illustrates the respective advantages and disadvantages of each for clients and practitioners. In this analysis he demonstrates the continuing importance of maintaining professionalism (with some changes) as the main organizing principle for service sector work. Freidson does not use the term 'occupational value' and instead focuses on the importance of knowledge and expertise; but he maintains that occupational control of the work (by the practitioners themselves) is of real importance for the maintenance of professionalism. It is important because the complexities of the work are such that only practitioners can understand the organizational needs of the work, its processes, procedures, testing and outcomes. It is by means of extensive (and expensive) systems of work place training and socialization that the new recruits develop the expertise to put theoretical knowledge into practice and to control the work systems and procedures.

Professionalism in turbulent times

This interpretation represents what might be termed the optimistic (or positive) view of what professionalism and the process of professionalization of work entails. It is based on the principle that the work is of importance either to the public or to the interests of the state or an elite (Freidson, 2001: 214). According to Freidson, 'the ideal typical position of professionalism is founded on the official belief that the knowledge and skill of a particular specialization requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal learning' (2001: 34-35). Education, training and experience are fundamental requirements, but once achieved (and sometimes licensed) then the exercise of discretion (discretionary decision-making rather than autonomy, see Evetts, 2002) based on competences is central and deserving of special status. Practitioners have special knowledge and skill and because of complexity it is often necessary to trust professionals' intentions. One consequence is that externally imposed rules (from states or organizations) governing the work are minimized and the exercise of discretionary decision-making and good judgment, often in highly complex situations and circumstances, and based on recognized competences, is maximized.

It can also be argued that professionalism represents a distinctive form of decentralized occupational control and regulation which constitutes an important component of civil society. Professions create and maintain distinct professional values or moral obligations (e.g. codes of ethics) which restrain excessive competition by encouraging cooperation as well as practitioner pride and satisfaction in work performance – a form of individualized self-regulation. Indeed it could be argued that professional commitment (professionalism) has frequently covered for the various failures of statutory and organizational forms of work regulation. Where statutory and organizational forms have been seen to impoverish the quality of work and increase the bureaucracy, professionalism can be defended as a uniquely desirable method of regulating, monitoring and providing complex services to the public (Freidson, 2001).

There is a second more pessimistic (or negative) interpretation of professionalism, however, which grew out of the more critical literature on professions which was prominent in Anglo-American

analyses in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period professionalism came to be dismissed as a successful ideology (Johnson, 1972) and professionalization as a process of market closure and monopoly control of work (Larson, 1977) and occupational dominance (Larkin, 1983). Professionalization was intended to promote professional practitioners' own occupational self interests in terms of their salary, status and power as well as the monopoly protection of an occupational jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). This was seen to be a process largely initiated and controlled by the practitioners themselves and mainly in their own interests; although it could also be argued to be in the public interest (Saks, 1995).

A third development involved the analysis of professionalism as a discourse of occupational change and control – this time in work organizations where the discourse is increasingly applied and utilized by managers. This third interpretation is a combination of the previous two and includes both occupational value and ideological elements. Fournier (1999) considers the appeal to 'professionalism' as a disciplinary mechanism in new occupational contexts. She suggests how the use of the discourse of professionalism, in a large privatized service company of managerial labour, works to inculcate 'appropriate' work identities, conducts and practices. She considers this as 'a disciplinary logic which inscribes "autonomous" professional practice within a network of accountability and governs professional conduct at a distance' (1999: 280).

It is also the case that the use of the discourse of professionalism varies between different occupational groups. It is possible to use McClelland's categorization (1990: 107) to differentiate between professionalization 'from within' (that is, successful manipulation of the market by the group, such as medicine and law) and 'from above' (that is, domination of forces external to the group, such as engineering and social work). In this interpretation, where the appeal to professionalism is made and used by the occupational group itself, 'from within', then the returns to the group (in terms of salary, status and authority) can be substantial. In these cases, historically the group has been able to use the discourse in constructing its occupational identity, promoting its image with clients and customers, and bargaining with states to secure and maintain its

(sometimes self) regulatory responsibilities. In these instances the occupation is using the discourse partly in its own occupational and practitioner interests, but sometimes also as a way of promoting and protecting the public interest (e.g. medicine).

In the case of most contemporary public service occupations and professionals now practicing in organizations, however, professionalism is being constructed and imposed 'from above' and for the most part this means by the employers and managers of the public service organizations in which these 'professionals' work. Here the discourse (of dedicated service and autonomous decision making) is part of the appeal (or the ideology) of professionalism. This idea of service and autonomy is what makes professionalism attractive to aspiring occupational groups. When the discourse is constructed 'from above', then often it is imposed and it is a false or selective discourse because autonomy and occupational control of the work are not included. Rather, the discourse is used to promote and facilitate occupational change (rationalization) and as a disciplinary mechanism of autonomous subjects exercising appropriate conduct.

This discourse of professionalism is grasped and welcomed by the occupational group since it is perceived to be a way of improving the occupations' status and rewards collectively and individually (e.g. aspiring caring occupations). It is a powerful ideology and the idea of becoming and being a 'professional worker' has appealed to many new and existing occupational groups; particularly during the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. social work and social care occupations throughout Europe and North America).

However, the realities of professionalism 'from above' are very different. The effects are not the occupational control of the work by the worker-practitioners, but rather control by the organizational managers and supervisors (e.g. health and social care work). Organizational objectives (which are sometimes political) define practitioner-client relations, set achievement targets and performance indicators. In these ways organizational objectives regulate and replace occupational control of the practitioner-client work interactions, thereby limiting the exercise

of discretionary decision-making and preventing the service ethic that has been so important in professional work. This type of 'organizational professionalism' is clearly of relevance to the forms of public management currently being developed in the UK, and more widely, in educational institutions (schools and universities) and in NHS hospitals and primary care practices.

The appeal to professionalism can and has been interpreted as a powerful motivating force of control 'at a distance' (Miller and Rose, 1990; Burchell et al, 1991). It is also effective at the micro level where essentially it is a form of inner-directed control or self-control where close managerial supervision is not required – professional workers don't need supervisors. Professionalism will be achieved through increased occupational training and the certification of the workers-employees, a process Collins labels 'credentialism' (1979; 1981). In these cases the appeal to professionalism is a powerful mechanism for promoting occupational change and social control.

But the appeal to the discourse by managers in work organizations is a myth or an ideology of professionalism (Evetts, 2003). The myth includes aspects such as exclusive ownership of an area of expertise, increased status and salary, autonomy and discretion in work practices and the occupational control of the work. The reality of professionalism is actually very different. The appeal to professionalism by managers most often includes the substitution of organizational for professional values; bureaucratic, hierarchical and managerial controls rather than collegial relations; managerial and organizational objectives rather than client trust and autonomy based on competencies and expertise; budgetary restrictions and financial rationalizations; the standardization of work practices rather than discretion; and performance targets, accountability and sometimes increased political controls.

Professionalism in organizations: challenges

The consequences of and challenges to professionalism as an occupational value, and some of the unintended consequences, are being documented by researchers interested in different occupational groups in Europe

and North America (e.g. Schepers, 2006; Wrede, 2008; Champy, 2008; Dent et al, 2008; Boussard, 2006; Bolton, 2005; Bourgeault and Benoit, 2009) and research links with sociologists of organizations are developing (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). There are also some early indications of what might be a retreat from or a substantial redefinition of certain aspects of managerialism in respect of some service work (e.g. target-setting for hospitals and doctors in the UK).

It is also the case that powerful professionals have often been resistant to managerial intervention and organizational controls. Many organizations in the public services (e.g. hospitals and universities) are complex professional bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1983) characterized by the involvement of a number of different professional groups. These groups have a history of relative autonomy over their working practices and often have high status which gives them both power and authority. In addition, the 'outputs' of these organizations (and the professionals in them) are not easily standardized and measurable. When the ability to define and standardize the nature of the work process is limited and the definition of the outputs of the work (and what constitutes success) is problematic; then such service work would seem to be unsuitable for both market and organizational controls. Yet controls such as performance review and target-setting continue to be developed supposedly in the interests of value, transparency and accountability.

It can be stated, however, that organizational techniques for controlling employees have affected the work of practitioners in professional organizations. The imposition of targets in teaching and medical work – and indeed for the police (see Boussard, 2006) – have had 'unintended' consequences on the prioritization and ordering of work activities; and a focus on target achievement to the detriment or neglect of other less-measurable tasks and responsibilities. Increased regulation and form filling takes time which might arguably be devoted to clients and the professional task. Performance indicators, linked to future salary increases, are defined by the organization rather than the individual practitioner or professional association. The standardization of work procedures, perhaps using software programmes, is an important check on the underachieving practitioner, but can be a disincentive to the creative, innovative, and inspirational

professional.

It is important to remember also that the way professionals regard their service work and their working relationships is also being changed. An emphasis on internal as well as external markets, on enterprise and economic contracting, are changing professionalism. In tendering, accounting and audit management, professionalism requires practitioners to codify their competence for contracts and evaluations (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Lane, 2000; Freidson, 2001). 'Professional work is defined as service products to be marketed, price-tagged and individually evaluated and remunerated; it is, in that sense, commodified' (Svensson and Evetts, 2003: 11). Professional service work organizations are converting into enterprises in terms of identity, hierarchy and rationality. Possible solutions to client problems and difficulties are defined by the organization (rather than the ethical codes of the professional institution) and limited by financial constraints.

The commodification of professional service work entails changes in professional work relations. When practitioners become organizational employees then the traditional relationship of employer/professional trust is changed to one necessitating supervision, assessment and audit. In turn, this affects the relations between fellow practitioners in the organization. When individual performance (e.g. of pupils and teachers, GPs and consultants) is linked to the success or failure of the organization, then this amplifies the impact of any failure. The danger in this is that professional cohesion and mutual cooperation are undermined and competition can threaten both team working and collegial support.

Relationships between professionals and clients are also being converted into customer relations through the establishment of quasi-markets, customer satisfaction surveys and evaluations, quality measures and payment by results. The production, publication and diffusion of quality and target measurements are critical indicators for changing welfare services into a market (Considine, 2001). The service itself is focused, modelled on equivalents provided by other producers: shaped by the interests of the consumers and standardized. The marketing of a service organization's service product connects professionals more to

their work organization than to their professional institutions and associations. Clients are converted into customers and professional work competencies become primarily related to, defined and assessed by, the work organization.

Professionalism in organizations: opportunities

The challenges to professionalism as an occupational value seem numerous, but are there any opportunities associated with these changes which might improve both the conduct and the practice of professional service work and be of benefit for professions as service institutions, practitioners and clients? Might there be some advantages in the combination of professional and organizational logics for controlling work and workers? Certainly there are opportunities for practitioners which might prove to be beneficial from the combination of the logics of professionalism and the organization. One of these is the incorporation of Human Resource Management (HRM) from the organization into professional employment practices, processes, procedures and conduct of the work. Job contracts, job descriptions, formal interview and selection procedures, employment rights and benefits, appeals procedures, sickness benefit and cover, maternity, caring and other absences, are all examples which have benefited the majority of professionals working in organizations and have for the most part replaced less formalized social networking and informal recommendation procedures.

Standardization and formalization of selection, retention and career development procedures have also increased the transparency of what were often hidden, even 'mysterious' arrangements in respect of promotion, career progress and departmental relationships and links within the organization. Less formalized procedures benefited only a select few, privileged practitioners and were perceived as unfair and inequitable by the majority. Increased transparency can then result in more emphasis on career choices, dependent on personal circumstances, rather than the sponsorship of the privileged few. Career inequalities clearly continue (including in respect of gender and ethnicity), as well as some reliance on networking, informal advice and recommendations, but, in general, the incorporation of HRM procedures and regulations

from the organization into professional employment practices has been an opportunity and of benefit for practitioners and their work.

Other opportunities would seem to be explained by the increased recognition that organizational management and managerialism is not only complex, but is also multi-layered and multi-dimensional. Management is being used to control, and sometimes limit, the work of practitioners in organizations but, in addition, management is being used by practitioners and by professional associations themselves as a strategy; both in the career development of particular practitioners and in order to improve the status and respect of a professional occupation and its standing.

As a micro-level strategy there is some evidence, particularly from health professionals such as nursing and midwifery (Carvahlo, 2008; Bourgeault et al, 2004), but also now from medical doctors (Kuhlmann, 2008) and teachers (Gewirtz et al, 2009), of individual practitioners acquiring qualifications in management (e.g. the MBA) with the clear intention of developing careers. In the case of health professionals such as nurses and midwives, this can also be interpreted as a strategy in the competition with medical dominance: but increasingly hospital management at middle and senior levels is perceived as a career opening for those with appropriate management credentials, experience and motivation.

As a mezo level strategy, it is also interesting to note the work of Langer (2008) in respect of social work in Germany. Masters level programmes for social workers in Germany are incorporating management training as a way of increasing the status, standing, reputation and respect for social work as a professional occupation in the field of social services work. Following the Bologna process and standardization of higher education levels in Europe, in Germany there is a large development of Masters programmes which qualify (in this case) social workers to apply for leadership positions in non-profit organizations and social services departments. These developments can be interpreted, therefore, as both a micro and mezo level strategy in respect of social work.

In addition, as Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011) have argued, organizations can constitute sites for (and objects of) professional control and domination.

Professionalism in turbulent times

Ackroyd (1996: 600) describes this as a form of 'dual closure' where access to labour markets (through registration and credentialism) is combined with informal control of access to particular work tasks and divisions of labour within the employing organization. Brint (1994: 73) explained how, in the corporate sector, 'high value-added applications within organizations can be more successful in enhancing status than closure in the labour market'. Similarly, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2008) have shown how managers and administrators benefit from their ability to control, devise and construct the bureaucratic machinery as well as to resolve central problems of their organizations. In addition it is important to recognize that organizations can constitute sites for the re-development of professional forms and methods of control (rules, values, norms and standards), to supplement or replace the organizational forms (hierarchy, management, efficiency and target objectives).

Other processes also explained by Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011) refer to jurisdictional disputes and negotiations – originally described by Abbott (1988) but this time played out within organizations rather than in the wider arena of labour markets and education systems. Within organizations, occupations seek to process and control tasks and task divisions to suit their own occupational interests. The medical profession – particularly doctors employed by the state – continue to use their cultural authority and legitimacy to maintain dominance (Larkin, 1983; Freidson, 2001; Coburn, 2006). Armstrong (1985) describes competition between professionals in management (accountancy, engineering and personnel) in colonizing key positions, roles and decision-making with large organizations. In these ways organizations constitute arenas for inter-professional competitions as well as professional conquests. Or, as Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011: 393) explain, organizations can 'provide a means through which traditional objectives of collective mobility, status advancement, financial reward and service quality can be better served'.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the maintenance and development of professionalism in all kinds of work in organizations, and its links with management, present opportunities and benefits for professions, professional work and workers as

well as important challenges. Perhaps achieving a balance between challenges and opportunities for professionalism in organizations is one of the most important tasks for states and for researchers in the sociology of professional groups over the next few years.

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Professionalism in turbulent times

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