Client Professionalization, a Resource for Heterogeneous Professionals: For a Pluralistic Account of Corporate Professions

Scarlett Salman[1]

1. Sociology Department, Université Gustave Eiffel, Paris-Est, LISIS, France

Contact: Scarlett Salman, Paris-East Eiffel University & LISIS (Laboratoire interdisciplinaire Sciences Innovation Sociétés), scarlett.salman@univ-eiffel.fr

Abstract

Drawing on the corporate professionalization model, the notion of client professionalization denotes new, client-oriented strategies of legitimization and claims relating to expertise, differentiation, regulation and dissemination. Based on the case of executive coaching in France and its professionalization process, the paper shows how these strategies enable heterogeneous categories of actors to become recognized as professionals. These strategies act as resources because they are grounded on principles other than exclusion and monopoly, such as extension and co-production, which give new value to heterogeneous socialization experiences and multiple activities. The emphasis on client-relationship skills affords atypical professionals' access to rewarding positions that would otherwise have been unattainable for them. These strategies are important for occupations such as coaching that are practiced by self-employed individuals, who have been overlooked in the literature. They also tend to constitute an appealing access to professionalization, in a context where the power of the market is increasing.

Keywords

Corporate professions, client professionalization, self-employed, executive coaching, emergent occupations, sociology of expertise, social morphology

Introduction

Following calls for more extensive research on corporate forms of professionalism (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011; Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018; Reed, 2018), this paper contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the "corporate professions" (Ackroyd, 2016), by focusing on those practiced by self-employed, solo practitioners and freelancers, which have been overlooked in the literature. It seems relevant to explore this kind of profession, since the numbers of "independent professionals"—knowledge workers who work as independent contractors—have exploded in recent years in Europe (Rapelli, 2012; Bologna, 2018; Semanza & Pichault, 2019).

This diversity among "corporate professions" in terms of work contract has implications for the conceptions of professionalism involved. The concept of "client professionalization" (Salman, 2019) has been coined to denote the new strategies of institutionalization developed by professionals, in response to clients' "injunction to professionalism" (Boussard, Demazière, Milburn, 2010), so as to secure a professional territory around an emergent practice. Alternative conceptions of professionalism emerge from this kind of professionalization process, which take into account more the "active" place of the clients (Sturdy, Werr & Buono, 2009; Sturdy & Wright, 2011). These conceptions focus on value for the client, competencies vs. qualifications, multiple skills and limited social closure, coincidence of interest and co-production. They draw more broadly on a new conception of expert power, based on "extension and linking" rather than on "restriction and exclusion" (Eyal, 2013).

In this paper, I show how this client-oriented professionalization process can afford new professional opportunities to some categories of actors who were excluded from the labour market – especially from the most protected areas of the latter. This more diverse conception of professionalism has opened the scope of corporate occupations to more heterogeneous professionals, thus resulting in increasing heterogeneity among them. The heterogeneity in emergent corporate occupations, especially those practiced by independent professionals, is threefold: inner diversity within the professional group, diversity in terms of social composition, and diversity in terms of their work contract. The analysis of the heterogeneity within "corporate professions" can thus contribute to a more intersectional approach in the sociology of professions, through a better integration of other socio-material identities and positions such as gender, class and race (Brady, 2018; Azocar & Ferree, 2017). This multifaceted heterogeneity can be analyzed using the framework proposed by Parding, Bellini and Maestripieri in this special issue, in three dimensions:

"within", which looks at the increasing diversity inside each professional group; "between", which focuses on the differentiation and competition between professional groups; and "beyond", which highlights the changing relationship between clients and professionals and the way professional groups try to govern it. This paper shows that the heterogeneity within emergent corporate professions—especially those practiced by the self-employed—and their differentiation from others, have benefited from the "client professionalization" process, just as it has nourished them.

The paper takes the case of executive coaching, a corporate occupation that emerged in the US in the 1980s and spread to France and other European countries in the 1990s. In France, coaching has been disseminated in large organizations and has spawned a professional group evidenced in the creation of professional associations, training, and the arrival on the market of practitioners offering this activity as coaches. The number of these coaches in France increased from about 250 in the second half of the 1990s to 3,000 at the end of the 2010s. Coaches, who are self-employed or associated in very small businesses (limited liability companies of two or three individuals) , contract directly with client companies or provide their services as subcontractors of large consulting firms. Coaches constitute a widely heterogenous professional group, ranging from HR consultants to former senior executives in large companies, self-help therapists with fewer formal qualifications, communication trainers, and so on. This heterogeneity leads to internal competition to define what professionalism is for these consultants.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section introduces the theoretical approach by grounding the concept of "client professionalization" in the wider debate on professionalism. The second section describes the research design, the data generated and its analysis. The third section presents the findings by analyzing the case study in the three dimensions of the framework on heterogeneity: within, between, and beyond. The fourth section provides a discussion on the links between "client professionalization", new forms of professionalism, and heterogeneity in professions. It explores the ways through which "client professionalization" strategies offer a resource to various kinds of professionals, who can access relatively prestigious positions without the classical profile usually required by professions.

"Client professionalization" among "corporate professions"

Managerial or "corporate professions" (Ackroyd, 2016) convey new conceptions of professionalism, which are more commercial and market oriented (Hanlon, 1998). The "corporate professionalization" model (Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, & Hall, 2011; Kipping et al., 2006; Muzio, Hodgson,), for one, is designed to capture these new processes by showing some of the main strategies of these professions: forms of closure based on competences rather than qualifications, multi-tiered membership and organizational membership schemes, legitimization strategies focused on market value rather than achieving legalistic

forms of closure, and international rather than national jurisdiction. So far, this model has focused on corporate professions whose labour market is dominated by large firms specialized in management consultancy, project management, and executive search, in the UK and the US.

The "client professionalization" model (Salman, 2019) has been proposed firstly to account for the professionalization of emergent corporate occupations, where large organizations are not structuring the labour market, unlike in the "corporate professionalization" model. It aims at better understanding the institutional professionalization of corporate occupations that are practiced by the self-employed. Even if they seem to "shun the wider practices of professionalization" in order to "maintain a chameleon-like status" (Cross & Swart, 2018), the self-employed seek forms of "organized professionalism" (Cucca & Maestripieri, 2016) and turn to organizing and solidarity mechanisms to reduce their increasing vulnerability (Maestripieri & Cucca, 2018). The key concept of "client capture", which describes instances when clients become so powerful that professionals lose their autonomy and independence (Dinovitzer, Gunz & Gunz, 2014; Gunz & Gunz, 2008; Leicht & Fennell, 2001), can be applied to independent professionals, who are not able to turn to an employing organization to protect themselves from economic dependence on their clients. The role of clients in consultants' practice is being studied more and more as "active" (Sturdy et al., 2009; Sturdy & Wright, 2011) and has implications for professionalization. By considering "so-called consumers" as "active", professionalization is seen as a "branding activity", "best approached as a relationship" (Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam & Sullivan, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the "client professionalization" model brings together the new kinds of professionalization strategies of a professional group whose relationship to clients is central, especially when the professionals are self-employed. There are five kinds of strategy: legitimization strategies that highlight added value for the client and not only a moral mandate; forms of closure based on competences rather than qualifications; a differentiation process designed to satisfy clients and to reassure them, by valuing multiple skills rather than searching for a strict social closure; a regulation through codes of ethics that stem from the clients' normative injunctions rather than from the professional group itself; a new form of dissemination, relying on collaboration with internal actors inside client organizations rather than on competition.

"Client professionalization" comes with alternative conceptions of professionalism, which draw on the new definition of expert power proposed by (Eyal, 2013; Salman, 2019). Contrary to the neo-Weberian sociology of professions, focused on a conception of power "understood under the twin forms of monopoly and autonomy" (Eyal, 2013), Eyal's sociology of expertise pleads for another conception of power, consisting of what he calls "generosity" and "co-production". This conception gives new value to the typical strategies of "client professionalization", since they can be seen as strategies of "generosity" (through

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the soft social closure and cooperation with competitors, and through the involvement of multiple internal actors inside client companies) and "co-production" (through the regulation based on the co-production of ethical criteria and through the relational expertise at the heart of the competencies). This more interwoven relationship between professionals and clients may then not result in less power for both the expertise and the experts, since it can enhance the latter's authority. The template of "client professionalization" thus shows that professions are not doomed to be passive victims of marketization, just as Faulconbridge & Muzio (2008) showed that professions were not systematically compromised by their embeddedness inside large organizations. These strategies of a new kind can serve as indicators of the professionalization of emergent occupations (Brès et al., 2019) and they should be tested as such in further research on heterogeneity in professionalism.

Research Design

This publication is based on an ethnographic study conducted in France in the 2000s, first in 2002, then between 2006 & 2009, and completed at the end of the 2010s. It draws on empirical data from interviews and observation, and quantitative data, as well as analysis of secondary documentation. I conducted audio-recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews with consultant coaches (n=45), human resources managers who prescribe coaching (n=16) and coached managers (n=18). As this paper focuses on the professional group of coaches, I will develop only the methodology used to collect data through the coaches. The 45 coaches were selected to constitute a diverse sample of the professional group. More than half of them were prominent coaches, founders of coaching schools and key members of the oldest professional association in France, SF Coach. The second half of the interviews consisted of: a dozen in-house coaches at large companies in a variety of industries (public/private, automobile, energy, rail transportation, telecom, banking), who provided information about the dissemination of coaching in companies; and ten coaches, not affiliated to a professional association, chosen to explore the boundaries of the professional group.

All the interviews lasted 2 hours, and the prominent coaches were interviewed several times. The interviews were structured as follows: first a biographical overview; second a part on professional practices, relations with clients, and conceptions of professionalism; and third a part on the professional association, where relevant. Observations were also carried out to better understand the professional group's actions. I monitored SF Coach closely for a year, attending monthly evening meetings, participating in their annual colloquium, meeting with senior personnel at the association's office, and scrutinizing their documentation. My study of the professional group benefited from a quantitative survey that I had launched in 2002, through a questionnaire that I had drafted and sent to SF Coach members (116 respondents, out of a total of 400 members). The data collected were exploited through descriptive and factorial analysis.

The dates of this long-term ethnographic study enabled me to cover the whole process of professionalization of executive coaching in France almost from the beginning, thus providing unique data on the emergence of the new occupation and on the institutionalization strategies of its promoters. This contrasts with the existing research on coaching, which focuses on the results of coaching (Mulvie, 2015) or its practice (Louis & Fatien-Diochon, 2018; Pichault, Fatien-Diochon, Nizet, 2020. A study of the professionalization process of executive coaching is moreover crucial to an analysis of the heterogeneity of this professional group, since this heterogeneity is related to the dynamics of professionalization itself. While the promoters of the institutionalization of coaching were consultants and a few psychotherapists, the followers were partly former executives who had turned to coaching after them. They were initially clients of the first coaches, and from there they became practitioners themselves and sometimes instigators of the implementation of coaching within their company.

Coaches' conceptions of professionalism have been systematically related to their biographic trajectories, in line with the recommendation of Hughes (1958) to take into account the study of "careers" in the conception of work. This is key in the case of coaches, since coaching is a second occupation in their lifetime: 71% are older than 45 (ICF, 2016). Paying attention to professional as well as personal trajectories is also relevant to an analysis of the self-employed (Bertaux & Wiame, 1981), who are more likely than their employed counterparts to experience the entanglement between private and professional life.

All the interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed by coding transcripts, by attaching keywords and themes to different segments in order to structure the raw data. The qualitative analysis of coaches' biographical trajectories was also combined with the statistical analysis of their profiles, so as to put these conceptions into a broader perspective. Therefore, very few interview excerpts will be quoted in the following sections, as the analysis focuses on the trajectories and on the institutional level.

Findings: From within to beyond, executive coaches as heterogeneous professionals

Nursing The professional group of executive coaches can be considered as heterogeneous in several ways. Using the theoretical framework on heterogeneity, this section first shows, in the within dimension, that the group of coaches demonstrates an inner heterogeneity related to socio-professional profiles; second, in the between dimension, coaching attracts more atypical profiles than its competitors such as consulting and is more diverse in itself, since coaches offer multiple services; third, in the beyond dimension, heterogeneity is found in the professionalization process itself, which differs from traditional strategies. In the

three dimensions, heterogeneity is linked to the place of the client in the professionalization process.

Within—inner heterogeneity and competing conceptions of professionalism

Executive coaches are a heterogeneous professional group in terms of socio-professional profiles and background. Most coaches started coaching after they turned 45, which means that they started their career in another occupation. The examination of their biographical trajectories reveals two main ways of entering coaching: either as a consultant or management trainer with a "bushy" trajectory, for whom coaching represents a professional opportunity that becomes a guideline around which various activities are reorganized; or else as a senior executive for whom coaching is a professional reorientation after a rupture (e.g. dismissal or accident) in a linear career within a large organization.

The heterogeneity within the professional group stemmed from the dynamics of the professionalization process itself. While coaches with the first profile—former consultants—were the promoters of the institutionalization of coaching, those with the second profile—former executives—followed in their footsteps. This dynamic is related to a specific relationship between clients and professionals, where some of the clients tend to become professionals themselves. These two profiles have competing conceptions of professionalism.

Becoming a coach as an opportunity for consultants and trainers on the fringes of the consulting world

The first profile of coaches consisted of consultants and trainers who were older, more often women or less qualified than consultants from large consulting firms. They worked as independent professionals or partners in small businesses, before turning to coaching. While coaching afforded them an extra skillset, it ultimately allowed them to extend their professional field and to gain a higher social position. This first profile, which can be described as "opportunistic", has two ramifications. In the first subgroup, coaches practiced their previous activity freelance, in an eclectic trajectory made up of numerous jobs and alternative sequences of salaried employment and independence, or even unemployment and inactivity. Although most of these coaches were from affluent backgrounds, some of them were from lower classes. They practiced diverse activities, ranging from psychotherapy to communication, education, social work, and so on. Most of them held no formal degree, even if they had started to study, or they had changed orientation several times. Some of these eclectic coaches were women, usually from upper classes, who had quit the job market to raise their children. Married to senior executives in large organizations, they would give their spouses advice about their workplace issues, but in the privacy of their

home, thus gaining experience that would later serve them in their work as coaches. The second subgroup was composed of consultants, graduates in psychology who were formerly employed in consulting firms but had resigned to become coaches, claiming that they wanted to go back to their initial vocation by choosing an activity close to psychotherapy. This second subgroup illustrates an internal tension within the consulting world, between consultants who stayed in professional service firms and others, more frequently women or men having experienced a rupture (like a disease for example). This internal tension was linked to the differentiation process from which coaching emerged as a new occupation, and which is presented in the "between" section of this paper.

Becoming a coach as a way out for executives undergoing professional retraining

Most executives who have reskilled as coaches have left their companies and are performing completely different functions from those, they had during the first part of their career (as engineers, sales managers, financial managers, etc.). They may, although rarely, become internal coaches in their former company, but always at the cost of a break with their previous professional identity. Coaches with this profile turned to the new occupation after a series of professional dissatisfactions: dismissal or resignation, sometimes correlated with a personal rupture, painful professional experiences, or loss of career prospects. Many women among them have experienced the glass ceiling—a broader phenomenon that leads women from organizational careers to self-employment (Mallon & Cohen, 2001). These women, some of whom are engineers, turned to coaching after having been coached themselves. They claim to do a job that suits their vocation, which, they say, is more "human" than "technical". Finally, provided that former executives are able to pay for private training, coaching enables them to (re)access employment without having to follow a long university course. By staying in the business field, they can build on the first part of their career and take advantage of their skills, their address book and their initial qualifications. In addition, symbolic promotion is important since, as coaches, they help and advice those who were previously like them.

Competing conceptions of professionalism—Experience versus expertise, a reverse couple

These two main profiles do not have the same relationship to coaching. For former consultants and trainers, most of whom were already self-employed, the new occupation was an opportunity to gain prestige in the consulting market. By contrast, for former senior executives it was seen as a way out after a rupture, but it meant an economic downgrade. However, former executives who have reskilled as coaches tend to behave as "converts", as in the religious sense: they are more convinced than the initial believers.

The heterogeneity within the professional group has implications for their conceptions of professionalism. The two profiles of coaches defend their own conception, leading to internal power struggles between them. The definition of what it is to be a professional was initially influenced by coaches of the first profile, consultants and psychotherapists who introduced coaching in France and founded the first professional association. They were the ones to define coaching and to establish an accreditation committee to select coaches. In their view, professionalism is based on psychological expertise, work on oneself through psychotherapy, and experience of the relationship to business clients. According to these criteria, consultants or management trainers with a psychological background can make good coaches. By contrast, former executives appear as newcomers and are less experienced: they have not built up a network of business clients and they have no expertise in psychology, apart from their recent training in coaching.

However, former executives can compete for other reasons. To them, the professionalism of coaching is based on an inner knowledge of organizational issues, that can be acquired only through professional and personal experience. They are quick to stigmatize the "shrinks" who have no idea of what business is, and they play their own experience as former executives against the expertise of consultants. But they also use the reverse argument of their initial qualifications: even if these are not connected to coaching, their prestige (engineering, MBA, etc.), compared to those of consultants and trainers, outweighs other such considerations.

In each of these two competing conceptions of professionalism, experience and expertise are equally present, but play a reverse role. Former consultants highlight their experience of the relationship to the client, whereas former executives stress their experience of management and organizational contexts, that is to say, the main issues of their clients in coaching. This shows the clients' influence on professionalism. Both of the profiles use these arguments when trying to convince potential clients, and the inner power struggle takes place on the job market, even though it can be found between the professional associations (the International Coaching Federation having attracted more former executives, and SF Coach, the oldest body, more consultants and psychotherapists).

Between—Differentiation strategies to establish a new jurisdiction for coaching

Heterogeneity does not appear only within the professional group of coaches but also between the latter and competing occupations. The strategies of coaches and their professional bodies to differentiate themselves both from consulting and from psychotherapy are marked by the influence of the clients. Coaches lay claim to a specific "jurisdiction" (Abbott, 1988) without closing themselves off from the possibility of practicing consulting and training, to satisfy their clients' multiple needs. Their differentiation from psychotherapy aims more to reassure clients than to distinguish themselves from

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competitors. The strategy of multiple activities to foster their client loyalty may explain the limited social closure that characterizes "corporate professions" (Ackroyd, 2016).

Coaching was presented in professional rhetoric and, in the interviews, as an alternative to consulting, and even its opposite: the coach's work is not based on the transmission of expert knowledge; it is aimed at guiding the coachee in the self-management of their own problems. Criticism of consulting was nevertheless based less on head-on opposition than on a dialectics. The claim that there was no transmission of expert content was based on an internal differentiation, within consulting, as Schein (1969) suggested, between the "provision of expertise" and "maieutics" or "process consultation". Coaching was even presented as a way of enhancing consulting itself, through the method of "maieutic consultation". Coaches tried to "reduce the work of competitors to an (incomplete) version of theirs" (Abbott, 1988), which is key to success in inter-professional competition. Moreover, as coaches, offering their clients other services such as consulting helped them to maintain a large labour market, by sustaining a portfolio of clients with changing demands.

As coaches had to reserve for themselves the possibility of practicing other activities, they finally opted for the only strategy that independent businesses could adopt in the management consulting market, in which large firms were predominant: the complementarity of these activities. They ensured that the boundaries between professional segments were respected: the coaching space could be situated "upstream" from the large Anglo-Saxon consulting firms. In interviews, coaches criticized the standardization of consulting methods, which according to them was contrary to the "customized" nature of coaching services. They claimed that "small is beautiful" because closer to clients' needs, referring to the personalization of the service, which they presented as their particularity compared to larger firms. This sharing of the consulting territory mitigated potential conflict with the large consulting firms. It allowed coaches to work as subcontractors for these firms, which was in the interests of both, since the consulting firms wanted to offer coaching services to their clients without employing a coach full time.

The professional rhetoric of coaches was also directed at differentiating themselves from psychotherapy. But here again, the differentiation process was turned towards clients, to reassure them regarding their fears with respect to psychotherapy, rather than aiming to distinguish coaches from the competition of "shrinks". The argument was that coaching was restricted to the "professional" domain, whereas psychotherapy pertained to the "personal" domain.

Beyond, "client professionalization" as a way to manage the growing place of the client

Finally, heterogeneity is also to be found in the professionalization process itself. How has the professional group of coaches governed the current change of marketization? This is the

purpose of the analysis of the "beyond" dimension. The concept of "client professionalization" (Salman, 2019) serves to heuristically answer this question. I present a summary of these strategies as they appear in the case of the institutionalization of executive coaching in France, except for the second strategy (differentiation), which has been presented above in the "between" section of this paper.

Convincing clients through professional rhetoric

Coaches' professional rhetoric aimed at convincing potential clients of the necessity of coaching. This rhetoric first relied on symbolism (Kipping, 2011). The word "coaching" was adopted even though it was an English word, because the American origin symbolized managerial innovations in France. The optimism attributed to the American culture made it possible to break away from the idea of suffering and the figure of the psychotherapist that client corporations feared. This was accentuated by the reference of the word "coach" to sport, which had strong appeal in the economic world, where it maintained the meritocratic illusion of fair competition.

Professional rhetoric also relies on "theorization", which consists in specifying generic problems and justifying particular innovations as solutions to these problems (David et al., 2013). In coaches' rhetoric, theorization was designed to convince potential clients that coaching was the best way to address the human problems that, through the lack of "managerial skills", hindered their firms' performance. The client-centered orientation of the theorization explains the emphasis on "added-value" in the rhetoric. But moral arguments, constituting a "moral mandate" (Hughes, 1958), were also used to add legitimacy to the new occupation by evoking cultural values and altruism, an important feature in emerging fields (David et al., 2013).

Relational form of knowledge and client-focused expertise claim

Coaches' professional associations established accreditations and certifications. These certifications can be analyzed as "impersonal devices of judgment" (Karpik, 2010) designed to reduce quality uncertainty related to market opacity, when there is no institutional or external regulation. While calling for the recognition of specific expertise for coaching, the associations retained criteria other than qualifications and valued skills: previous professional experience (external to coaching), supposed to guarantee the coach's understanding of the professional issues the coachee had to deal with; specific training; values, such as "ethics" and "quality"; the mastery of coaching skills; and on-going professional supervision. The emphasis was on the coach's practice and experience of human relationships, so as to highlight the client's place in the service delivery. Co-production is found in every kind of service, but coaches claimed it as an integral part of their work, for they use the relationship to the client as a tool in their coaching. Finally, all the associations adopted multi-level membership certifications. The national branch of the

ICF also certifies training courses, in addition to the accreditation of individual practitioners, but not coaching firms (again, because most of the coaches are independent workers).

The main associations joined forces in the 2010s and secured the registration of coaching as one of the "self-regulated professions" of the European Union. Above all, in 2015 they achieved the addition of coaching training to the National Register of Professional Certifications (RNCP) of the French Ministry of Labour. This granted official recognition to those who had been trained in a certified coaching course. Without establishing an institutional closure, this title granted de facto recognition to the coach's professional activity, on the basis of self-regulation, avoiding strict closure based on qualifications.

Regulation as an "injunction" by clients to "ensure professionalism"

The fears expressed by potential clients with regard to coaching were the risks of sectarian affiliation, of collusion between the coach and the coachee, and of intrusion of the company into the employee's private life. Professional associations tried to reassure potential clients, that is, the "prescribers" and recruiters of coaches (HR managers), as well as coaches, by means of some "impersonal devices of trust" (Karpik, 2010), designed to limit the risks of malignancy and opportunism in the absence of state regulation. All associations drew up codes of ethics, with common criteria such as "confidentiality" or "the coach is prohibited from exercising any undue influence". These devices can be interpreted as responses to the "injunction to ensure professionalism" (Boussard et al., 2010) expressed by client organizations that needed to be convinced not only of the advantages of coaching, but also of the quality of this service and its providers.

Dissemination through the alliance with internal actors inside client organizations

Once the professional territory had been secured, which made the exchange of services possible, it was necessary to introduce and set up coaching within client organizations. The role of internal actors in organizations in supporting dissemination needs to be emphasized (Sturdy & Wright, 2011). Rejecting a unitary view of the client being the organization, I identify three kinds of internal actors who played a role in the dissemination of coaching: executives who became in-house coaches; HR managers; and senior company executives. The professional group of coaches had to find ways to make alliances with them, to ensure that they were not only "interested" but also "enrolled" (Callon, 1984). These actions resulted in the lasting integration of coaching into companies as a HR management tool.

Client professionalization for heterogeneous professionals

I would like to draw some general conclusions by analyzing the relationship between the three dimensions of the framework (within, between and beyond), used to study the heterogeneity of the professional group. In my case study, the key dimension is "beyond",

insofar as it shows how the professional group of executive coaches has governed the increasing role of the client through a "client professionalization" process. I examine the links between this process and the heterogeneity that is found within and between, by discussing more broadly the hypothesis that "client professionalization" contributes in several ways to heterogeneity among corporate professions.

First, "client professionalization" strategies are mobilized particularly by occupations that are composed of heterogeneous workers and people excluded from the classical job market, such as independent professionals. Furthermore, its specific strategies facilitate the access of these heterogeneous workers to more prestigious occupations that they would otherwise have failed to attain because of a lack of traditionally recognized professional features. By their alternative conceptions of professionalism, through "linking and extension" (Eyal, 2013), these strategies reinforce the position of these heterogeneous professionals and their less classical trajectories. Conversely, their heterogeneous trajectories explain part of this new kind of client-oriented professionalism.

Heterogeneity can first be related to alternative work arrangements. The internal composition of the "self-employed" category is hard to identify (Leighton and McKeown, 2015), because of its wide heterogeneity (Semanza & Pichault, 2019). New forms of contingent work and independence such as freelancing and self-employment offer new job opportunities to more diverse categories of people, some of whom were previously excluded from the job market. In France and in other countries such as the USA, self-employment has been considered as a way to reduce unemployment (Kerjosse, 2007), even if it is not the main explanation for the rise of alternative work arrangements (Katz and Krueger, 2017). For women, contingent work is a way of re-entering the job market after a period of inactivity (Landour, 2015) and self-employment can help to maintain a professional activity after dissatisfaction with the organization (Mallon & Cohen, 2001). Self-employment through which coaching is mainly practiced has brought back to the job market several categories who had been excluded from it: in the first place, women, spouses of senior executives, who had quit the job market to raise their children; but also a certain kind of senior executive, more vulnerable to unemployment and less employable, who had been dismissed as a result of redundancy plans or restructuring. Against the broader backdrop of outsourcing and offshoring of well-paid middle-class jobs (Barley, Bechky & Milliken, 2017) and career stagnation within large organizations, self-employment is gaining new appeal by promising to meet the current aspirations for freedom and autonomy (Leighton & McKeown, 2015; Menger, 2002; Semanza & Pichault, 2019). Many former executives who turned to coaching, including women and some atypical men who experienced a glass ceiling or a personal breakdown, fall into this category. However, these new forms of independence offer only job opportunities and do not imply any professional protection in themselves (Maestripieri & Cucca, 2018); on the contrary, they can lead to some forms of precariousness (Murgia, Maestripieri & Armano, 2017). Independent professionals even

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face a "social paradox" between the persistence of professionalism as a reference model and the risk of downward social mobility related to their non-conventional job status (Semenza & Pichault, 2019).

The process of "client professionalization" shows how the "social paradox" experienced by independent professionals can be solved in practice on an institutional level. Contrary to more classical forms of professionalization, these new strategies contribute to allowing individuals from a broader spectrum of social categories to become professionals, to secure their own professional territory, and to make their occupation widely recognized as a new profession. Previously, coaches could never have performed traditional forms of professionalization in France, where three types of recognized professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts) dominated mental health and where PSFs ruled consulting. It is the emphasis, in the conceptions of professionalism, on client-relationship skills, that has given these atypical professionals access to rewarding positions that they would not otherwise have been able to attain. First, forms of closure based on skills rather than on qualifications enable them to bypass the traditional barriers of professions. This is seen in the trajectories of eclectic trainers and consultants, some of whom had few formal qualifications, but who turned to coaching and gained symbolic advantage without a degree. This is also the case of senior executives who changed careers. Even though their qualifications had nothing to do with their new occupation, a short period of training was enough because they could capitalize on their previous experience and status as managers. Coaching can even give access to more prestigious and better paid positions than the ones obtained with a protected degree in psychology. Some of the graduate psychologists introduced themselves to their clients not as psychologists but only as executive coaches. Additionally, a differentiation process which values multiple skills rather than searching for strict social closure also contributes to heterogeneity amongst professionals. This strategy protects people who are at the fringes of the consulting world, who practice multiple activities to satisfy their clients' needs and who have a more diversified social profile than the consultants employed by professional service firms. The strategy of dissemination through collaboration with internal actors also gives more value to another type of professional, especially former clients who reskill as coaches and come to the new occupation with a different background, such as former executives who turn themselves into coaches. Finally, the new kind of regulation is close to what Wedel (2009) calls "coincidence of interest" —the opposite of "conflict of interest" —, which is typical of "flexians", the new kind of professional, consultant or academic that represents business interests and whose activity permeates the boundary between public and private. These more heterogeneous professionals can find in this new kind of regulation a way to reconcile and even to give value to their multiple affiliations, instead of seeing them as "conflicts of interest". It is thus the "client professionalization" process that can integrate new categories of workers into a relatively secure professional territory, whereas independence only offers

new job opportunities and may even lead to precariousness. People who are either remote from the professional world—like housewives or self-employed individuals offering a variety of services—or threatened within it—like fired executives or women experiencing job dissatisfaction—find a way to enter or to maintain themselves in highly skilled occupations. The strategies of "client professionalization" give heterogeneous workers resources to access valued positions, either to experience social promotion or to limit social downgrading.

This result is also found in other independent professions such as real estate agents and more broadly in "commercial" professions whose relationship to clients is central, both in the work arrangement and in the work activity itself (Bernard, 2012). Real estate agents illustrate a heterogeneous professional group who access middle-class positions without "academic capital" or "economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1979). They achieve this by mobilizing what Bernard (2012) calls "uncertified cultural capital", which consists in skilled use of language and familiarity with ways of being from intermediate or higher social backgrounds. This notion is close to Bourdieu (1979)'s "incorporated cultural capital" but also refers, in a broader sense, to cultural resources acquired in the course of heterogeneous socialization experiences that can be used to support economic success (Bernard, 2012). That also means that the heterogeneity of the professionals' experience conversely nourishes the kind of professionalism involved: it leads them to develop soft skills which are crucial in the relationship to clients, and which help them to build an extended network. Inadequate qualifications or multiple activities are no longer obstacles in themselves to professionalism; as they provide heterogeneity, they can extend the scope of the professionals' competencies and of their networks of potential clients. It was advantageous for coaches, for instance for women advising their spouses at home, to value and commodify their skills, and by doing so they were extending the reach of their expertise network, as dietitians did with medicine and nutrition science (Brady, 2018). Against this backdrop, heterogeneous professionals, by the inner diversity of their socialization experiences as well as a more extended social composition and multiple activities, may contribute to "extension and linking" (Eyal, 2013). Heterogeneity is thus also a resource for professionalization, in the sense of the extension of the network of expertise (Brady, 2018).

The alternative, client-oriented approach to professionalism can finally give a new legitimacy to the less classical trajectories and new status of independent professionals. Some of them, such as executive coaches, even see this new model as an alternative to the classical conception of monopoly and exclusion based on qualifications. Coaches can be partly seen as "issue professionals" (Henriksen & Seabrooke, 2016), who share a normative mission and address a societal issue. The mission they claim to have – to "develop the potential" of the individual – is consistent with a liberal ideal that challenges the power of traditional professions. As they intervene in large organizations and spread their conceptions within them, they might be seen as active agents of a social change that

contributes to the decline of the social recognition of professions based on qualifications – at least to its symbolic decline, in line with the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006). The respective weight of the traditional professions and of these new forms of professionalization (Barley et al., 2017; Brès et al., 2019) must be assessed. The question is whether these new strategies are now decisive criteria to access professions. As the traditional professionalization process is becoming more difficult, the client-centred approach seems more appealing. This even leads to question whether the examples of traditional professions (mainly medicine and law) were simply deviant extreme examples of a process that happened to work for them, rather than an institutional model that could be replicated by others.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the study of the increasing heterogeneity among corporate professions and their conceptions of professionalism. It applies the analytical framework proposed by Parding, Bellini and Maestripieri to study professionalism in its heterogeneity— "within", "between" and "beyond"—to the case study of executive coaching and coaches. It thus shows that a new professional way to govern marketization, in the "beyond" dimension, can contribute to the inner heterogeneity of the professional group, "within", as well as to its heterogeneity "between" its professionals and other competing occupations. In other words, heterogeneity comes as a result of the more interwoven relationship between clients and professionals.

Heterogeneity first comes from a new kind of professionalization, "client professionalization" (Author, 2019), intended to account for emergent corporate occupations practiced outside of large organizations, by independent professionals. "Client professionalization" indicates more broadly a new model of professional response to manage the challenge of marketization and the more interwoven relationship between professionals and clients. Heterogeneity is also found in the social composition of professionals themselves, which is diverse among the self-employed. Some social categories of workers, who were remote from professions or even excluded from the labour market, make their way to professionalization through these client-oriented strategies. "Client professionalization" can then be seen as a way to integrate more heterogenous professionals into corporate occupations. Its main strategies can allow them to secure a professional territory and not only to find new job opportunities through independent work status. These strategies act as resources for these heterogeneous workers as they enable them to become professionals and to attain positions that they would not have been able to reach otherwise. They act as resources because they are founded on principles other than "exclusion and monopoly", such as "generosity" and "co-production" (Eyal, 2013), which gives new value to an extended network and collaboration with multiple stakeholders. It is the emphasis, in these conceptions, on client-focused skills, that gives atypical professionals

access to rewarding positions. Their heterogeneous socialization experiences, due to irregular careers, inadequate qualifications or multiple activities, cannot be reduced to obstacles to access professions, as in the case of a classical professionalization process. They offer new competences which are crucial in the relationship to clients and which gain new value in this new form of professionalism.

The article is based on the case of executive coaching and coaches, but this result is also found more broadly in "commercial" professions, mostly practiced by independent professionals such as real estate agents (Bernard, 2012), for whom the relationship to clients is crucial, both in the work itself and in the access to valued social positions. It suggests the need for further research, on other emergent corporate professions such as public relations (Reed, 2018) or corporate social responsibility practitioners (Brès et al., 2019), who already share many of the alternative conceptions of professionalization. The question of the relative weight of these new professionalization strategies and of the more classical ones must be assessed, to engage in the debate on the "changing nature of work" (Barley et al., 2017) and its effects on social morphology—although the answer depends on national context. This question must be asked, as in the organizations in which they intervene, some heterogenous professionals such as executive coaches are prone to defend their new conception of client-oriented professionalism based on "extension and linking" (Eyal, 2013). In line with the broader rhetoric of the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006), which gives new value to "project" and "network", this new conception is likely to challenge the foundations of classical professions.

Article history

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