

## Editorial: Heterogeneity Among Professions and Professionals

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The society in which we are currently immersed is the result of a long-period transformation that sociologists have framed under the concept of post-industrial society. Some of the main characteristics identified by this concept, such as the importance of knowledge as a factor of production, the rising centrality of expert labor and the progressive dematerialization of professional activities (Bell, 1973; Touraine, 1969), have been heuristic tools useful to explain the rising importance of professions and professionalism to understand current social change. However, we argue that the transformation towards a post-industrial society has impacted on the composition of professional groups, on the relations between different professional groups, as well as on the role of professionals in society. *Long-term change processes*, such as tertiarization, globalization, femininization, digitalization, and precarization—all part of the post-industrial transformation—have contributed to breaking the “social contract” between professionals and society, which implied high rewards in terms of income and prestige in exchange for the monopolistic exercise of functions of great significance for society itself. More than that, they have arguably caused a change in the very idea of professionalism (Evetts, 2003; 2006; 2011). The aim of this special issue is to try to empirically identify and theorize these long-term transformations and their impact on professionalism.

More specifically, *tertiarization* has changed the workforce structure, with an increase in the stock of intellectual workers—such as professionals—in total employment. *Globalization*

and *feminization* have modified the composition of professional work, with a growing number of women and migrant practitioners among professionals (Dent, Bourgeault, Denis & Kuhlmann, 2016). The upskilling of the workforce, determined by the democratization of education, is behind the numerical expansion and the increasing diversity of professionals. Moreover, *digitalization* has changed the nature of professional work, transforming how expert knowledge is produced and conveyed, affecting the capacity of professional groups to control labour markets and the relationships with clients (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). In this context, digital platforms have gained importance as providers of professional services, creating the conditions for new ways of organizing professional work to develop. Finally, the *precarization* of work has also involved once privileged groups, such as professionals, with continuous growth in the number of freelancers and a general deterioration of working conditions (Murgia, Maestriperieri & Armano, 2016). The instability in employment and working conditions and the rising polarization between bad and good jobs, such as irregular vs permanent jobs, are pieces of evidence fiercely debated for a long time in the sociology of work; however, they are under-investigated in the sociology of professions, as if professionals were immune from such phenomena (Bellini & Maestriperieri, 2018).

This special issue engages with the previously discussed trends affecting professional work, in the context of changing labour markets and societies. Our argument is straightforward: critical processes of change have triggered multiple *differentiation* processes, resulting in an increasing heterogeneity among professions and professional; as such, heterogeneity can be better understood in the context of a *coherent multi-dimensional analytical framework*. These changes, both driven by and impacting on the labour market, call for a deeper understanding of the world of professions, as it is situated in new circumstances. Not only are there more professionals than ever, but they also are more diverse (and unequal), in one word: professions are now characterized by increasing heterogeneity.

While heterogeneity is the focus of this special issue, we would like to clarify how the concept of differentiation is of relevance when examining professional work today and how it is linked to the concept of heterogeneity itself. *Differentiation* brings about substantial changes in structural positions, employment situations, and working conditions, which call for new ways of conceptualizing, analyzing, and interpreting professional work. Its functioning can be observed from three points of view, corresponding to different analytical dimensions (Bellini & Maestriperieri, 2018). The first dimension is the differentiation “within”. This dimension concerns the increasing distance that separates the constitutive components of a profession, focusing on the processes that differentiate professional groups internally. In the collection of articles presented here, Pacchi & Mariotti, Gaiaschi, and Casula highlight the issues related to the increasing diversity that characterizes the inner composition of professional groups. The second dimension is the differentiation “between”. This dimension concerns the geographies of professional groups, focusing on the institutional factors that affect interprofessional relationships and increase the distance between professional

groups. The articles by Ingellis & Estaban and Calenda & Bellini explore the challenges that professionals have to cope with when moving in different regulatory systems, including the confrontation with changing equilibriums in the interprofessional relationships. The third dimension is the differentiation “beyond”. This dimension concerns how professional groups govern the ongoing societal changes and, in so doing, influence the trajectories of differentiation and define professionals’ public role. Indeed, the mechanisms of differentiation in place are multiple and complex. The article by Salman stresses the possible societal consequences a new professional group—such as executive coaches—has on management.

Separating the three dimensions is an analytical strategy to make order in the complexity of labour transformations that occurred in the last decades (Beckert, 2010). These dimensions should be considered “irreducible” in the sense that their underlying processes and mechanisms are interrelated and have consequences for each other.

By *heterogeneity*, we refer to the outcome of differentiation. Heterogeneity involves professionals being increasingly diversified. While the number of those defining themselves as professionals today is greater than ever, a growing proportion of expert labour is situated outside acknowledged models of professionalism. Besides, the composition of the professional workforce has become more and more differentiated in terms of age, gender, social origin (class and/or migrant background), employment contract, type of organization, and workplace. As such, heterogeneity has to do with the changing social bases of professions as well as with emerging patterns of professional practice and work organization.

In brief, our goal with this special issue is twofold: first, we intend to *explore* the increasing heterogeneity among professions and professionals; second, we aim to *interpret* heterogeneity as an *outcome* as being related to differentiation as a *process*. We look at professional work in the light of an increasing heterogeneity due to differentiation processes within, between, and beyond professions. The authors of the collected articles made an effort to use these concepts and position their contributions in the analytical framework described above to account for the most recent changes in the world of professions, focusing on different professional groups across countries and under different circumstances. The contributions are thus unified by the same aspiration to understand heterogeneity, although in different professional fields. For this purpose, they investigate differentiation processes along multiple lines—within, between, and beyond.

## **The collection of articles**

During the Interim Meeting of the Research Committee 52, Sociology of Professional Groups, of the International Sociological Association, held in 2019, July 4-6, at the University of Florence, Italy, we organized a session titled *Varieties of professionalism: Exploring heterogeneity within and between professions*. The call for papers for this session resulted in

three sub-sessions, which included several engaging oral presentations. Along with the session, we invited the participants to a workshop where we discussed how we could move the conversation about professionalism forward, using the concepts of differentiation and heterogeneity. This special issue is one of the outputs of the intense intellectual exchange we enjoyed in Florence. It consists of six contributions, covering a range of critical topics, including job precariousness, gender inequalities, professional-client relationships, and migrant integration. All of them can be positioned in the three-dimensional space created by combining the within-between-beyond dimensions as lines of differentiation, to draw a complex picture of the changing world of professions. Furthermore, they explicitly use the concepts of differentiation and heterogeneity as heuristic categories and develop the underlying analyses along one or more of the three dimensions.

The first article, by Carolina Pacchi and Ilaria Mariotti, *Shared spaces or shelters for precarious workers? Coworking spaces in Italy*, critically discusses the relationship between professionals, new workplaces—such as coworking spaces (CSs)—and the related work patterns in the Italian context. The authors argue that, through a careful interpretation of the emerging dimensions and spatial effects of CSs, it is possible to identify dynamics of inclusion/exclusion on the one hand and cooperation/competition on the other, which characterize the job paths of new knowledge-based occupational groups. In terms of heterogeneity, they focus on freelancers, usually operating alone in the market or joining forces in small and flexible organizations. Some of them belong to liberal professions, some not, with different employment statuses and career paths. The research findings bring to light the variety of occupational conditions and increasing precariousness of these professionals, who look for “shelters” in coworking spaces, where they can find “people like them” and possibly start new associations, going beyond traditional peer bodies.

The second contribution, *The academic profession in neoliberal times: Challenges and opportunities for women*, by Camilla Gaiaschi, focuses on the implications of neoliberal management for female academics. The empirical case is based on administrative data on the Italian academic population and includes qualitative interviews with academic life-scientists in a specific employer organization—that is, a public university. As the author demonstrates, the implications of university transformations in terms of gender-based heterogeneity are complex. On the one hand, by tightening the access to the tenure track, neoliberal recruitment policies have increased gender inequalities and kept women at the margins of academic career tracks. On the other hand, the adoption of performance-based values and practices has ambivalent consequences for women, entailing both challenges and opportunities, which includes creating room for agency and, possibly, disrupting male-dominated hierarchies.

With a contribution entitled *Local broadcast journalists and the trap of professional heterogeneity*, Clementina Casula investigates how current societal and labour-market changes impact local journalists in Italy. Indeed, journalism in that country has been

affected by widened and protracted precarization. As the article shows, only a minority of journalists can live of their work, with journalism being only a partial and precarious income source for most practitioners. It is concluded that the ongoing differentiation results in structurally heterogeneous professional groups: in the same organization, it is possible to find both permanent and temporary professionals doing the same job but at different salaries and working conditions, with collective actors playing a weak role in combating precariousness. If this situation is accepted without granting the necessary conditions to maintain professional standards, it may bring into question the feasibility of a professional community.

In the fourth article, *For a pluralistic account of corporate professions: Client professionalization as a resource for heterogeneous professionals*, Scarlett Salman deals with an emergent corporate occupation, executive coaching, which is practised by professionals working as independent contractors. The author argues that “client professionalization”, which characterizes this field, contributes to increasing the heterogeneity of corporate professions because of their multiple socialization experiences and diversified professional activities. For executive coaches, coaching is one among various services that compose their portfolio of freelancers, while the institutionalization of this profession occurs in reaction to an injunction to professionalism that comes from their clients. Based on an ethnographic study, the article reveals the threefold nature of heterogeneity among French executive coaches: their different market position, the social composition of this professional group, and their employment relationships.

The fifth article, *Labour insertion of Italian professionals in Valencia: Between emerging and traditional professions*, by Anna Giulia Ingellis and Fernando Osvaldo Esteban, presents the results of a case study on Italian self-employed professionals’ mobility to the city of Valencia (Spain), highlighting the heterogeneity of labour insertion paths within and between very diverse groups of professionals. The authors used qualitative methods: 25 in-depth interviews and a two-year observation in real and virtual communities. The analysis shows that Italian professionals need to overcome numerous barriers to enter an exclusionary, socially closed primary segment of a highly segmented local labour market. Furthermore, it reveals the relative disadvantage for those belonging to recognized professional groups in Italy who struggle to see their professional status recognized in Spain. These difficulties contribute to explaining the heterogeneity of insertion trajectories brought to light by the migrants’ narratives.

The last contribution, entitled *The challenging integration paths of migrant health professionals: The case of Filipino and Indian nurses in the UK*, by Davide Calenda and Andrea Bellini, addresses the increasing heterogeneity among health professionals in the United Kingdom, involving differential paths of socio-professional integration and rising inequalities, reflected in poor working conditions, among nurses recruited from the Philippines and India. The analysis shows that inequalities arose as linked to differentiation

processes induced by changes in the institutional settings. Furthermore, it identifies the restrictive rules on immigration and access to the profession as sources of uncertainty and unveils the differentiation of entry paths, with those who arrived through an international recruitment agency more frequently disappointed with their working conditions.

## **A post-Covid-19 future for professions and professionals: Some preliminary remarks**

As we are still in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is difficult to predict the magnitude and trajectories of the changes that the pandemic is bringing about in the field of professional work. The past few months have tested our capacity, as sociologists, to keep pace with the profound and rapid changes that the pandemic implies in our lives generally, and in working life particularly. Thus, professions and professionalism are no exception: we have witnessed a further transformation of what “being a professional” means, of the relationships between different professional groups and, generally, of the role of professionals in society (Maestriperi, 2021). Indeed, it is reasonable to think that the concepts of differentiation and heterogeneity, applied to describe and explain professional change, will help us make sense of the sociology of professions also in the post-Covid-19 era.

The differential exposition of professional groups to the effects of the restrictive measures adopted by governments, and the critical role played by digital technologies in the context of the emergency, induce us to hypothesize that the tendencies towards social fragmentation, the individualization of risks, and precarization will accelerate (Maestriperi, 2021). These processes are very likely to affect the capacity of professionals to secure their sources of income, of new occupations to successfully professionalize, and of a professional community to set up shared standards. A further step in understanding change is to study how the pandemic will affect the professionals’ public role (see Flam, 2019).

A final remark must be made. Despite having invited a gender-balanced group of authors from a wide range of geographical contexts and professions in focus, we realize that the contributing, mostly female authors are all based in Europe, and that most of them use examples from Mediterranean contexts. To further explore differentiation and heterogeneity among professions and professionals, it is highly important that more geographical contexts, professional systems, and professional groups are examined from different perspectives, such as age, gender, class, and race (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019; Dent et al., 2016). We believe it is worthwhile to develop the analytical approach we propose here, as it may help discover what is beyond our Eurocentric view of the world of professions, increase the opportunities for academic exchange and cooperation, explore the unexplored, and find links between the unlinked, with the ambitious aim of building a global sociology of professions.

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