PROFESSIONS & PROFESSIONALISM

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"I Sign, Therefore I am" (Un)stable Traces of Professional Practices

'Je m'affiche, je ne puis éviter de m'afficher

(*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 1975, p. 169)

Abstract: Signatures will be read as (un)stable traces of professional knowledges, practices, and identities. The paper intends to propose a theoretical framework to explore the sociomateriality of signature in occupational and professional practices. This exploration will be conducted by assuming a practice-based approach to "signing in practice" and therefore by paying attention to knowing as a situated practice within organizations. The aim of the paper is to invite to a line of research that considers signatures—in occupational and professional practices—as "matters of fact," i.e. stable traces resistant to disputation that "make" the professional accountable, and as "social fabrications," i.e. traces which emerge from professional learning and knowing, thus resulting from stable negotiations of human and non-human assemblages.

Keywords: signature, practice, profession, knowledge

Signatures are sociomaterial forms of stabilization that may have a multiplicity of instantiations (written signs, digital modes, symbols, drawings, etc.), and a plurality of sociocultural meanings (ownership, responsibilities, accountability, etc.). Signature may be considered the distinctive feature of professional expertise, a powerful symbol of professionalism and its accountability toward society. The power to sign may be considered one of the bases of professionalism which confers identity from the act of signing.

This "thought-provoking" and partly experimental paper intends to explore the sociomateriality of signature in occupational and professional practices. This exploration will be conducted by assuming a practice-based approach to "signing in practice" and therefore by paying attention to knowing as a situated practice within organizations (Nicolini, Gherardi, Yanow, 2003; Gherardi, 2005). From this perspective we shall consider "signatures" as "factishes," a term that Latour (1999; 2010) introduced by merging the concept of "fact" and "fetish." In fact, in occupational and professional practices signatures are at the same time "matters of fact," i.e. stable traces resistant to disputation that "make" the professional accountable, and "social fabrications," i.e. traces which emerge from professional learning and knowing, thus resulting from stable negotiations of human and nonhuman assemblages.

In sum, signatures will be read as (un)stable traces of professional knowledges, practices, and identities. The paper will unfold as follows: first we shall reflect on

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the characteristics of the "signature" according to a semiotic view, and in particular referring to Fraenkel's works (Fraenkel, 1992; Fraenkel & Pontille, 2006; Fraenkel, 2008); then we shall present our experimental reading of signature as "a factish" of professional agency; and we shall conclude with a suggestion for some possible areas of investigation on signing as a professional practice.

The semiotics of signature

Signatures convey a sense of solidification, as in the Latin term "firma," which refers to "ground" and is therefore opposed to the fluidity of the sea, which is in constant movement. In many professional practices, signature may be interpreted as a symbol of closure, a firm moment in the becoming of a practice, because signatures introduce punctuations and leave traces that may simplify or complicate the local unfolding of practising. In this regard, signatures may contribute to the black-boxing of objects of knowledge and learning by (re)distributing responsibilities for their possible modification or alteration. In these cases, signatures are intended to "draw a line," and possibly to impede further changes, as well as to circumscribe the use of objects, instruments and technologies (as when we download a software application and are asked to accept the terms of agreement). On the other hand, "signing," "subscribing," "making a signature" are frequent and recurrent moments of responsibility assumption within a practice. A signature may symbolise the end of a negotiation in everyday organizational life, and also an extraordinary event within a specific ceremonial and official protocol for the public recognition of agreement and responsibility (as in the case of international treaties, or in the "humble" ones of contracts, or more complex ones like marriage).

A signature may be made in multiple forms. It may be an autographic or an electronic signature, take the form of an image, or be a more elusive sign that metaphorically refers to an admission of responsibility that connects an action with someone/something. On the other hand, a signature is a trace, or a link, among who/what acts (an actant, or an action-net), the action (the object of action), and, partly, the intentional and non-intentional effects of the action. The signature retro-acts on what/who acts by stabilising its identity as the author of the action or work and as responsible for it. As a "matter of fact" the signature closes a work of art and stabilises an association between the work and its author, or between the work and a group of artists. For example some paintings are not the work of a single author but somehow the result of the efforts of artistic *ateliers* that carry the name of some authoritative author. Another example is the world of fashion, where a dress may carry the signature of a well-known stylist. A rapid survey of the history of signature shows that what we know as the autographic signature is a form inscripted and stabilised within the writing practices of a literate culture. In this respect, the autographic signature is circumscribed and defined by a sociomateriality composed of paper, ink, hand, and settings of archiving and storing. Here, the signature is an effect emerging from a process of definition which developed between the sixth and sixteenth centuries at royal and papal chancelleries, notary offices, and the local jurisdictions that the royal powers sought from time to time to homogenise (Fraenkel, 1992; 2008).

From that long and complex history we understand that the signature is a hybrid sign:

> a) that merges writing and drawing, since a signature is a result of writing but is also an image, a drawing, and
> b) that it is a sign of identity and at the same time a sign of validation (Fraenkel, 2008).

As a "matter of fact" the signature is a sign of identity—like first names, seals, arms, etc.—and a sign through which value and consent are given to the content of a document, to the use of a given technology (when downloading an application from the Internet, for example, we are asked to subscribe to the terms of use from which result effects in terms of incorrect use), to the validity of a contract among a set of institutional partners, and so on. Therefore, a signature is a sign of validation which signals a difference during the action, and which, in some cases, establishes the passage to action or from one action to another. A signature, in other words, may be an "obligatory point of passage" within diverse stages of a practice.

The effects of the stabilisation of the autographic signature have been numerous. First, the consolidation of the signature contributed to fasten the patronymic name (first name + surname), and progressively replaced alternative ways to express personal identity (seals, crosses, etc.). In particular, in the mid-sixteenth century, to sign meant to make an autographic signature, and since then the autographic signature has been the "right" sign to validate deeds and documents. Of course, this does not completely eliminate other signs accompanying the autographic signature that may personalise it (consider the use of the initials). Secondly, and accompanying the institutionalization of the signature, there has been the development of professions and occupations that ground their work on the practice of signing (like secretariats, chancelleries, and notary offices).

At the same time, the practice of signing becomes more complex since there is no unique association between the signature and the author but the concurrent assemblage of authors, witnesses and several signatures that guarantee the validity of a document (Fraenkel, 2008). Accordingly, one sometimes notes the presence of several signs (signatures, seals, and so on) on documents, and the differentiation of roles in signing that comply with diverse local and organizational rules (in some cases an autographic signature is affixed; on others, the preference is for seals, or initials, etc.). The signature thus becomes an object of value for chanceries, secretaries, and notaries. "*La signature est donc issue des métiers, des professions de l'écrit*" ("the signature is therefore a question of professionalism and of writing professions," Fraenkel 2008, p. 19). In other words, the signature is the product of several occupations, and of the professions linked to the technology of writing. An investigation of the signature reveals the collective work of gathering many actants together in order to prepare, write, edit, read, and sign. It is work that involves humans and non-humans, a sociomateriality made up of professions of writing, but also a culture of materiality visible in the choice of paper, inks, pens and glosses, as well as in the many ways to amend and correct texts. The autographic signature has also stimulated development of the practice of archiving documents and files, and the differentiation among written objects in terms of "original" and "faithful copy" (or just "copy"), which may have specific values for the circulation of documents and may engender particular "force" for bureaucratic work.

By focusing on the signature we can see, on the one hand, the agency of those involved in the practice of signing in-the-context, and on the other, the efforts and the practices of archiving, of document keeping, as well as of classifying and circulating files. In other words, it is possible to depict the socio-technical networks of practice, professional knowledge and identities that develop from and converge on the autographic signature. This network—as we saw above when considering the

stabilization of the autographic signature—may be subject to considerable pressure to change. The recent diffusion of new information and communication technologies has profoundly modified the everyday practice of writing in workplaces and elsewhere. The massive entailment of digital technologies has changed the practice of identification and validation by making the practice of signing more complex. The growing ease of working and communicating at a distance increases collaboration and accelerates the coordination of activities, while it hampers clear identification of those contributing to a joint endeavour, and may therefore complicate the practice of validation. In cases of this kind, we witness the flourishing of diverse attempts to find solutions: for instance, the digital signature; or the e-signature which, in an attempt to solve the problem, produces a counter-intuitive effect and extends the dynamics of the signature also in the digital world. These sociotechnical arrangements may offer intriguing and also somewhat elegant solutions for the uncertainty of identities in the post-modern world. At the same time, these attempts also entail generalization of models of identification—as we shall see later—coming from contextual situations where concerns about the effect of mis-identification, and expectations about the security of the communication, may appear somewhat overrepresented (Fraenkel & Pointille, 2006).

Whatever focus of attention on signature we wish to choose (autographic or digital), analysis of the related practice of signing reveals complex negotiations among professional knowledges, practices, and identities, and it is a useful point of entry "in the middle of the things" (Latour, 2005) to investigate the contemporary dilemmas of professions and professionalism.

Exploring signatures as professional factishes

In the previous section, we discussed "signing" by paying attention to the semiotics of signature, and in particular to the autographic signature, which has been the dominant (at least until the advent of the electronic signature) form of signature in humanistic culture and modern literary education.[1] We also stressed certain effects of the stabilization of this form (e.g. the diffusion of the patronymic name), and the importance of understanding the sociomateriality of signatures by considering the complex local assemblages whereby the signature becomes an actant within an action-net. We also partly introduced examples relative to the practice of signing, and to signatures in workplaces.

In this section, however, we shall reconnect the previous discussion on the signature with the current debate on the professions, professionalism, and the knowledge-based society, avoiding assumption of a "trait model" approach to professions. We shall instead follow the tendency to avoid a clear-cut definition of what is or is not a profession, preferring to pay attention to professionalism as a discourse and how it is mobilized in workplaces for purposes of both occupational and organizational control (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Evetts, 2006; Evetts, 2011). This methodological choice has an origin in common with practice-based studies on knowing and learning in organizations (Nicolini, Gherardi, Yanow, 2003; Gherardi, 2005)—the approach to which we subscribe here. Both those interested in analysing the discourse of professionalism in the contemporary knowledge-based society (Fournier, 1999) and practice-based scholars take a relational approach to the study of the "social." They consider the "social" (and consequently the "profession," but also the "occupation"), not as an "essence" to be represented in sociolog-

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[1]An interesting question is the transformation of the signature in a post-humanist sociality where the sign is not necessarily associated with an individual human actant. We briefly sketch some aspects of this complex problem in a later section of the paper, when we introduce the concept of "ecology of signatures."

ical terms, but as a "becoming," something taking place and possibly stabilised—in other words, a contingent "association" of materially heterogeneous worlds (humans as well as non-humans). The specific contribution of practice-based studies however, consists in underlining the sociomaterial arrangements of claims to professionalism in workplaces, i.e. the material apparatuses of professionalism, and the situated conditions for the practising of those claims. Accordingly, we have a specific interest in discourse, and in the discursive practices (Gherardi, 2005) that mobilize an understanding of how a profession becomes a profession (how working practices become "a" practice), and how professions are the specific materializations of social arrangements and their effects on professional or occupational practice.

A focus on signing and signatures appears a particularly promising means to deepen our understanding of professionalism. By considering professionalization as the black-boxing of expertise (Trepos, 1996), we can analyse the signature as a symbol of professionalism. The practice of signing simultaneously involves the closure of a document, the expression of knowledgeable consent, and recognition of professional responsibility and accountability. In this regard, the signature is a specific kind of association where professional expertise(s) are at stake. Signatures, in other words, are *professional factishes*.

The notion of "factish" was introduced by Latour (1999) by merging the concepts of "fact," on the one hand, and "fetish" on the other. He coined the term "by beginning with the two words 'fact' and 'fetish,' the first being the object of a positivist discourse of verification and the latter of a critical discourse of denunciation. *By adding to either side the work of fabrication, we captured the root of work— facts are fabricated ("les faits sont faits")—as well as the etymological root of the word fetish.* 'Factish' gives a new resonance to the reiteration 'faire- faire' (meaning, in French, 'to make one do' and 'causing to be done') for both esteemed facts or disparaged fetishes, or the true as well as the false. In so doing, it shifts our attention to what makes us act and away from the obsessive distinction between the rational (facts) and the irrational (fetishes)" (Latour, 1999, p. 21).

Signatures are "matters of fact," that is, stable traces in professional practices, some(thing) almost difficult to dispute that give authorization to act. However, they are also social fabrications, mechanisms for assembling, and in some cases almost "fetishes" of professional knowledges and identities. They concern the power to sign and to assume responsibility, and thus to be accountable for the professional action. Signatures are both objects of professional knowledge and signs of a professional identity. They make it possible to analyse the sociomaterial assemblages among professional knowledge, tools, and identity, and to escape from the "binary thinking" of individual and organization, human and nonhuman, subject and object of professional expertise.

The concept of signature has also been used metaphorically to illuminate the distinctive pedagogies of professions. Here, it appears to anchor the notion of situated curriculum of a profession (Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella, 1998), that is, a relatively well-defined and widely applied learning path sustained by the community and deemed necessary to become a member of a profession. Each profession has a distinctive path, a teaching/learning practice that represents its signature. Therefore we may say that there is a "spirit of the signature" that is embedded in professional identity and that is appropriated even before becoming a full-fledged practitioner.

As a "matter of fact," the signature has been associated with the forms of teaching that appear to be recurrent in the reproduction, and we may add black-boxing, of professions and the discourse of professionalism. To develop this aspect, Shulmann (2005) has proposed the concept of "signature pedagogies" in order to direct attention to the pedagogies distinctive of a professional (or an occupational) field that guide practitioners to becoming acknowledged as knowledgeable participants

of a profession. In other words, by analysing these forms of teaching, it is possible to come closer to the "pedagogy of professions in action," since they are depicted as the "appropriate" practices of situated professional learning that shape the way in which "novices are instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work: to think, to perform and to act with integrity" (Shulmann, 2005, p. 52). Signature pedagogies may be included in a performative analysis of professionalization since they point to the stabilization of forms of teaching that temporarily close and stabilise the black-boxing of the expertise of a professional and occupational field by moulding professional borders and identities. In this respect, they are also factish as well because they are fabricated—meaning that they clearly have a history and are continuously subject to negotiation—yet at the same time they are sufficiently stable to orient practitioners towards professional knowledges, practices, and identities.

Whilst the notion of signature pedagogies has been mostly developed at theoretical level, some examples have been cited to illustrate the empirical grounds of the practice of signing, and specifically of signing a body of professional knowledge. Shulmann considered examples taken from medicine and law. Other empirical inquiries have considered social work or teacher education (Randles, 2009). In the case of medicine, for example, analysis has been made of the practice of bedside teaching "in which a senior physician or a resident leads a group of novices through the daily clinical rounds, engaging them in discussions about the diagnosis and management of patients' diseases" (Shulmann, 2005). In the case of law, the attention has been drawn to dialogue in quasi-Socratic form where discussion of a case of some complexity is the core of the first-year teaching activity by an authoritative teacher to a classroom of novices. In both cases, signature pedagogies "define what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known. They define how knowledge is analyzed, criticized, accepted, or discarded. They define the functions of expertise in a field, the locus of authority, and the privileges of rank and standing". In particular, "these pedagogies even determine the architectural design of educational institutions, which in turn serves to perpetuate these approaches" (Shulmann, 2005, p. 54).

The notion of signing as a situated practice both highlights the sociomaterial assemblage of knowledges, tools and identities in occupation/profession and aids understanding of the claim to distinctiveness of occupational or professional fields made visible through practices of professional learning. The relationship between the claim to distinctiveness and the signature clearly relates to the identity dimension of the sign. It suggests looking at those dynamics intended to shape organizational identities and that represent the object of specific professional identities. We refer here to the fabrication of inscriptions like logos, drawings, images, and so on, that may be considered organizational signatures, and that, like autographic signatures, are visible signs of identity, and also signs of validation of professional and organizational knowledge.

A theoretical and methodological framework

If signatures are complex objects of professional, occupational, and organizational identity, means of validation, and promises of social accountability, as we have tried to show in the previous sections, how can the practice of signing and the signature be investigated? Methodologically, in order to study signatures as factishes we may adopt an ecological model of professional practices. In an ecological model of practice, the signatures (and the practice of signing) may be considered within the "texture of connections in action" that constitutes professional practices (Gherardi, 2008). In other words we may start from the sociomateriality of the act of signing within a profession and follow the connections in action that the "matter of

fact" of the signature sets in motion within the signed document and the other documents that the latter become linked to the former both within the organizational unit in which the document was signed and within other organizational units of the same organization, and between the organization and other organizations. We may imagine that through the act of signing a document becomes an authorised text that initiates a journey, and in travelling brings with it the authority, responsibility and trustworthiness of its author. The document becomes the spokesperson (the spoke/actant) of one or more organizations, and in its travelling it enacts their accountability and represents the affiliative power that establishes connections within a texture of practices. The agency of the signature is distributed within an ecology of human and non-human actors.

Within this analytical framework we may investigate what the practice of signing "does" and what its doing does, i.e. which social effects it produces. The practice of signing may be studied at three analytical levels a) practice from outside b) practice from inside, and c) practice in the circuit of its reproduction, for the effects that are produced within an ecology of professional signatures.

When we investigate the practice from outside, we are interested in grasping the activities involved in the performance of the act of signing. We ask ourselves questions like these: what needs to be aligned in order for a heterogeneous assemblage of humans and non-humans to assume the form of a document needing to be signed (and by whom). How is the action-net that gives the authority to a signing subject to express competence, responsibility and accountability performed to become a recursive instance of the practice of signing? In this regard, the practice of signing is considered as an "array of activities," as a "matter of fact," and the practice of signing is described as a recurrent pattern of activities. Knowledge about the practice of signing is here anterior to the situated practice of signing, and the professional may have this knowledge as part of his/her training. From the organizational point of view (signing as an organizational practice), signature is a mechanism to reduce uncertainty and distribute accountability, to validate documents by proving professional competence, and to assign responsibilities. On considering signatures as matters of fact, we also grant a degree of objectivity to the action supported by professional competence and involving a clear-cut set of professional identities.

There is a case in the literature where a signature—whilst clearly fabricated—became difficult to dispute. In his study of the Conseil d'Etat, Latour (2002) illustrates a case where the difficulty consisted in disputing the signature of the President of the Republic. The counsellors tried to preserve the signature by adopting a decision that could have disrupted the principles of law and left the democratic architecture empty (as a "matter of fact," the case was presented as an "attack on the state"). The case is simple, yet the difficulty concerns the complexities of decision-making that might produce undesired political and normative effects. We are confronted here with a little company that disputed a decree of appointment signed by the President of the State and accordingly authorizing a public official to move from the state where he had the task of monitoring a bank to the chair of that same bank (Latour, 2002, pp. 182-202). The company argued that the decree was not correct since it made a decision against the current law that explicitly prohibited public officials from moving from the state to the private sector, and asked the Conseil d'Etat to cancel the decision. The company's claim was based on solid legal arguments; it had the force of a matter of fact, and the councillors were confronted with the objectivity of the law. At the same time, they were also dealing with the signature of the President of the State, who exercises the power of appointment, i.e. a specific power of the President, and a privilege sustained by political and normative forces.

This discussion highlights the confrontation between two type of objectivity, and the difficulty of a decision that arouses public debate on the limits of public powers, ethical issues about moving from being responsible for monitoring a bank

to its presidency, economic arguments on the contingency of the decision that almost affected the President's choice to appoint that public official to the chair of that bank that was under stress at that time. In the end, the Conseil d'Etat cancelled the decree, yet the counsellors had to mobilise their professional knowledge to reverse what the signature had allowed, that is, the forbidden passage from the public to the private sector. The decision was also an opportunity to reflect on the balance of democratic powers, a confrontation among a plurality of professional expertises, and a disputation among "matters of fact": the solid argumentation of a small company mobilizing the force of a somewhat forgotten principle of law, and the objectivity of a signature expressing a powerful and alternative circuit of knowledge/power.

We see in this case how the texture of practices was connected, and how it became difficult to untie those concepts once they had been connected through such an authoritative signature.

By contrast, studying practice from inside requires trying to understand "practice as a collective knowledgeable doing" from the point of view of the practitioners." In methodological terms, practice from inside is an epistemology that can be called "post-humanist" (Gherardi, 2009) in that it seeks to de-centre the human subject (as in the object-centred sociality of Knorr-Cetina, 1997) or to reconfigure agency (Latour, 2005) as a capacity realized through the associations of humans and materiality. Here the focus is on "how a practice is practised," in other words on how a professional collective knows how to perform a signature as a knowledgeable collective action by maintaining a common orientation and assembling materials, people, and activities. In this sense, signatures are fabricated, and the purpose of the investigation is to understand the "felicity conditions" —to quote Austin (1962)—in the practice of signing.

The literature contains an interesting case that illustrates this level of analysis. In her study on electronic signature, Fraenkel (2008) focused on the work of the summoners (*huissiers* in French) at legal offices. She analysed in detail their working practices in the fabrication of documents, and in particular signatures. She noted how the practice of signing was not a fixed and rapid temporal event in the flow of practising; rather, the summoners devoted a considerable amount of time to signatures. In particular, the signature was intertwined with reading and validating documents. The research also revealed the different ways in which the activity of reading was performed (quick, deep reading, etc.), and the collective distribution of this activity, which might involve many clerks in the office. Fraenkel writes: "*l'huissier ne signe pas seul; il signe avec toute son étude, même s'il est seul à le faire, souvent le soir, alors que son personnel est parti*" ("the summoner does not sign alone; s/he signs with the whole office, but at the same time s/he is the only one who signs, and s/he often does so in the evening when the staff have gone home"). This observation conveys how signatures are proof of professional competence, but of a collective competence enacted in situations where knowledge is mobilized, is made present through individual and collective remembering. In the end, the act of signing is an event of closure requiring a well-orchestrated assemblage of non-humans (paper, digital software, pens, etc.), the collective mobilization of knowledge, and the gathering of professional identities. In this sense, this investigation is interesting for understanding the invisible work of signature that is in the background when considering the practice of signing. Moreover, signed documents often have to be archived. This leads to consideration of the practices of archiving, and definition of what is the original and what the copy of a document, as well as all the considerations concerning the many ways of classifying, archiving, and managing archives. The research question then becomes: how do other action-nets become associated with a signed document and with what effect? On this view, signatures are not "matters of fact," but "matters of concern" of collective work situated in a texture of practices that mobilises professional identities.

This latter aspect is particularly important when one considers contemporary transformations in the practice of signing, as argued in Fraenkel and Pointille (2006).

The widespread introduction of the electronic signature calls into question consolidated ways of making signatures. It poses new issues regarding the identities of those who sign, and it mobilises new professional knowledges in that field. As a "matter of fact," it involves the setting-up of new sociomaterial assemblages as a consequence of the adoption of the cryptographic signature that changes the production of original and copy documents (and indeed the definition itself of what is an original and what is a copy). Such assemblages and the governance of the collective of actants implies the intersection with the military world, and with issues of safety relative to the transmission of contents and messages in need of the highest degree of confidence about the identities of those signing and receiving messages. That is to say, the practice of signing in a world where identities are always at stake makes visible the importance of the professional knowledge of cryptographers and informatics in materializing reliable associations in action.

Finally, we may analyse signing practices in their circuit of reproduction and in their effects, since a practice is also a way of doing that has intentional and unintentional effects on the production and reproduction of social structures. In this case we may ask questions about the circuits reproducing the practice of signing that contribute to sustaining certain structural conditions of our society. At this analytical level, the researcher asks: what is it that doing the practice does? And it is the level at which ethical questions can be asked and at which the emancipatory or exploitative effects of a social practice may be questioned (Gherardi, 2009). At this stage, it is possible to ask questions about the effects of signatures, and the related issues regarding the accountability of professional knowledge. What are the deliberate and unintentional effects of a signature? Or, what are the effects on professional cultures of changing the type of signature, for example by introducing electronic signatures? In what sense may signature strengthen or lessen professional identities?

Interesting questions concern whether, through the practice of signing, we can describe the contemporary dilemmas of the discourse on professionalism in knowledge-based societies. And in particular to understand whether the power to sign subscribes a specific form of professionalism, i.e. whether signatures may be seen as traces of organizational professionalism, which is a discourse on increasing organizational control over work conditions, or as expressions of an occupational professionalism that confirms the bottom-up control of professions within the situated space of "communities of workers" (Evetts, 2006).

A signature may be considered a trace with which to detect the ethical dimensions of signing, i.e. awareness of the responsibilities of professional knowledge, and the presence of dilemmas concerning alternative discourses of professionalism in black-boxing knowledge. We have seen in the case of the President's signature how the signature deliberately produced an effect (appointing a public official working for the state to the top level of a bank), and how this provoked a public dispute on passage from the state to the private sector in which ethical issues were debated, and the balance of powers in democracy was renovated through the mobilisation of the professional knowledge of the Conseil d'Etat (Latour, 2002). Several lines of investigation are possible. We may look at those concrete conditions where the exercise of the signature grants power and authority to professions, and where denial is on the contrary an obstacle to professional work. For example, we may devote attention to all those medical practices that involve the informed consent of patients. The literature is extensive (we may cite the work of Kelly, 2003). Official documents reiterate that the question should not be restricted to a contractual exchange solved by the signature, and should be addressed in a more complex and holistic way. Similar reflections regard, for example, informed consent in the case of research on children and the complexities of issues that may have deliberate and

non-deliberate effects on those involved in such research (Gallagher, et al., 2010). In these cases, investigation of the practice of signing may seek to determine whether a form of organizational professionalism is at stake, or whether the signature is inscribed in practices of occupational professionalism.

Conclusions

The signature and the practice of signing therefore furnish a point of entry for investigation of the complexity of professional work in contemporary societies. They enable development of a dynamic re-conceptualization of professional knowing and of professionalism whereby visibility can be given to the sociomateriality enacted by signatures, and above all, the practice of signing.

The signature, in fact, is an object that has a history in time (Fraenkel, 1998) open to a multiplicity of interpretations and uses. But is also a locus in which an alignment is sought—sometimes with difficulty owing to dynamics of contestation and confrontation—among multiple knowledges, identities, and accountabilities. In this sense, as shown above, a signature is:

(1) a "matter of fact," because it introduces a dimension of objectivity into professional work which has effects on action,
(2) a "matter of concern" able to activate the attention of a multiplicity of actors and to mobilize professional knowledge, and materialities.

We therefore propose consideration of a professional factish that makes it possible to perform professional work and to make it accountable to the numerous publics of professional action.

The signature and the practice of signing constitute a "texture of connections in actions" and, as an organizational practice that weaves sociomaterial relations together, it can be analysed: (a) from outside (b) from inside, and (c) in the circuit of its reproduction. In this methodological framework, in fact, it is possible to understand from a dynamic perspective not only how the objectivity, knowledges, and identities activated around the practice of change over time, but also the extent to which the multiple accountabilities of professional work strengthen the logic of organizational professionalism, or whether instead, the signature and signing are occasions for professional reflexivity and occupational professionalism able to activate virtuous processes of professional learning in practice.

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