PROFESSIONS & PROFESSIONALISM

Symposium: Professional Complexity and the Future Study of Professions

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Introduction

For more than a century, social sciences have singled out some occupations as "professions." But are there still good reasons for doing this? Society has changed in ways that challenge previous claims to exclusive knowledge and attendant privileges. Some examples:

- There are new values associated with occupational roles. Some occupations have taken a *relational turn*, which emphasizes care and dialogue as important counterparts to the mere impersonal application of formalized knowledge (Edwards, 2010).

- There are changing modes of organizing work. Professionals work in large organizations, and the terms of accountability and ethics in organizational life are different from the individualized oaths and commitments that we associate with independent professionals. This is sometimes called the *institutional turn* in professionalism (Thompson, 1999).

- Knowledge has become democratized through new technologies, most recently in the wave of AI tools. There may still be important epistemic asymmetries between professionals and laypeople, but they need to be reinterpreted. Hence, there has long been talk of a *democratic turn* in the studies of professions (Dzur, 2010).

All these "turns" indicate a field in flux. For some, the changes could be taken to constitute reasons to doubt whether "professions" and "professionalism" should still be treated as useful and unifying categories. For others, they are seen as a push to rethink the meaning and significance of professionalism today.

This tension illustrates why the 25th anniversary of the Centre for the Study of Professions (SPS) was used as an occasion to zoom out and take stock of our own field—and thereby mark an occasion for this symposium. The interdisciplinary research centre at Oslo Metropolitan University has explored many dimensions of professional work, and the basic assumption is that it matters both analytically and societally that some occupations are assessed by standards of professionalism. The centre has educated PhD students in the study of professions, organized courses on theories of professionalism, and pursued research projects devoted to key aspects of professional work. But *why* are "professions" and "professionalism" still important categories to understand the social implications of ways of organizing and practising knowledge-based work?

Outdated categories?

On one way of reading the current literature, the wealth of changes suggests that we need to find alternative categories. That seems particularly plausible if professional work is rigidly framed by Talcott Parsons' traditional account, in which "the professional complex" is described as a system where academic research, academic credentials, and academic training are systematically used to define a somewhat closed sphere of professional knowledge and integrity. Today's literature raises questions about whether it makes sense to speak of such a complex. Virtually every aspect of the traditional picture is challenged today. Are there really clear boundaries of membership? Are there shared standards of what counts as professional knowledge? Are ethical standards still determined internally in the community of practice? Mirko Noordegraaf's notion of a shift from "protective" to "connective" professionalism is a clear example of this trend. Consider these contrasting statements.

Parsons: "Professional groups must, to some essential degree, be self-regulating, taking responsibility for the technical standards of their profession and for their integrity in serving societal functions." (1969, p. 39)

Noordegraaf: "professional identities and acts become part of wider environments in which other professionals, organizational actors, clients, stakeholders, organizations, politicians, and publics are part of realizing 'professional' services." (2020, p. 218)

The second example is about what constitutes professional knowledge. While for Parsons professionalism was about relatively stable appeals to academic sources of knowledge, Noordeegraaf emphasizes dynamic relations where knowledge is co-created:

Parsons: "the acquisition of professional status is almost uniformly contingent on undergoing training of a relatively formally approved type." (1969, p. 40)

Noordegraaf: "Professionalism is not a matter of 'applying knowledge and skills,' but of securing relational processes in which joint action is generated. In this way, professional action can be tied to outside experiences, dilemmas, and stakeholder suspicion." (2020, p. 220)

Considering these statements, another reading suggests that is it possible to take the implications of Noordegraaf's view to be that professionalism is not a distinctive mode of work anymore. Through expectations of "integration" with wider environment and "joint action" through relational processes, there is little left of the traditional talk of professionalism as maintained through exclusive "jurisdictions" (Abbott, 1988) and bound by a distinct "logic" (Freidson, 2001) that isolates them from market forces and bureaucratic hierarchies. Hence, as an alternative to the perspective of professionalism, one could, for example, speak more generally about "expert" or "knowledge-based" occupations (cf. Gorman & Sandefur, 2014).

A living tradition or historical relics?

All this raises the question of the continued relevance of traditional conceptual frameworks, such as "the professional complex"—or the notions of autonomy and authority that are associated with "protective professionalism." Notice, however, that even if one accepted this, it would not in and of itself make traditional professional theory irrelevant today. Perhaps traditional professional theory is like a ladder that must be climbed before it can be kicked away. Traditional theoretical frameworks may be false in terms of empirical accuracy in today's landscape, but this is not similar to the way a chemist can refuse to teach an outdated theory like phlogiston. Perhaps, to shift the metaphor, it is more like having a set of glasses that prepares your eyes for an even better lens. There are several reasons for holding that the classic sociology of professions retains analytical relevance.

First, the traditional professional complex is arguably still part of the new complexity. There is still a transmission of knowledge from universities to practice. And professionalism is still widely associated with formal academic training and collegially defined standards. Moreover, the notion of a professional complex contains *normative* standards that may still be valid. Parsons anticipates what Freidson later called the third logic, as distinct from market and bureaucracy (2001). Even if it is not realized in full (it is an ideal type, after all), the logic may contain ways of thinking about responsibility and dedication to value that need to be rethought rather than rejected in the face of the new complexity.

Furthermore, in terms of analytical reflexivity, we need a contrast foil to understand change. All talk about increased complexity (including "hybridity" and "connectivity") makes little sense unless we have some traditional image that the understanding of change can depart from and that provides some overview of the direction of the development. Relatedly, the traditional story explains the sources of our concepts of professionalism. Concepts like autonomy or jurisdiction may not mean the same today in terms of concrete practices and regulation. But they may preserve an abstract or overarching meaning that connects different strands of current conversation.

The perspective of revival

However, perhaps we do not simply need a conversation about what can be rescued from traditional theories of professions. One could argue instead that what is really needed is a

revival of professional perspectives. That is, we can accept much of Noordegraaf's diagnosis without giving up on the importance of professions and professionalism as academically and societally important categories. We may need to think of new *modes* of professionalism, rather than alternatives to professionalism as such.

One way to think about this is to speak of the renewal of a "social contract" between experts, publics, and the state (Reed & Reed, 2023). This preserves the idea that certain occupations have a societal mandate that is predicated on a commitment to key values and recognized knowledge bases, yet seeks to *democratize professionalism* by opening up the domain of work to negotiation with more stakeholders and viewpoints. This is not just simply a prescription from ideal theory, it is increasingly part of professionals' actual obligations and strong policy encouragements. For example, research policy in Europe expects more dialogue among types of knowledge and between researchers and societal actors. This is illustrated by terms such as 'citizen science' and the values encoded in the 'responsible research and innovation' movement. It is argued that new forms of expert authority are needed, based on connective, collective, collaborative, and co-produced knowledge. The theory of professions must be able to capture circumstances where ensembles of professionals and non-professionals are jointly responsible for finding solutions to pressing problems.

An important question is how such "new social contracts" are to be squared with the impetus to *restore* traditional ideas of professional responsibility that have been challenged by forms of governance and accountability that promote efficiency and competition. It could be argued that the challenge is to restore professionalism in a way that retains a core of fiduciary and moral responsibility that is accountable to public values rather than market forces (Sullivan, 2015). These values should inform role-specific norms of care, respect, fairness, and more. But given that professionalism must be democratized, how does this leave space for a distinctive form of professional integrity?

Moreover, professionals possess forms of knowledge that can only be applied through carefully trained and situationally attuned discretion. An important question is whether and how these aspects can be preserved in modes of organizing work that rely on more bureaucratic and rule-based logics (Evetts, 2011). Can bureaucratic organizational structures leave space for professional modes of reasoning? The element of democratization mentioned above adds new complexity to this question. We need to consider the kinds of institutional frameworks that can create inclusive spaces of reasoning yet satisfy certain basic demands of knowledge, fairness, and responsibility.

These questions are not yet resolved in current theoretical perspectives. Julia Evetts, for example, presupposes a contradictory and conflicting relationship between the logic of professionalism and the logic of organizations and the market. But interdependencies and complementarities are not considered. Organizations depend on professional expertise, while professional work in turn relies on the structures and tools that organizations provide. Hence,

updated perspectives on professionalism should not only capture clashing logics but also when and how the relationship between professions and organizations merges into more complex, interdependent, co-constituted, and even symbiotic relationships (pursuing the lines of Barley & Tolbert, 1991; Bourgeault et al., 2011).

The symposium contribution

Naturally, this symposium cannot reflect all of the changes and challenges introduced above. Yet, we have collected contributions that each illustrate different aspects of the developments mentioned in the beginning: the relational, institutional, and democratic turns. Together, we think they support the revival approach to professionalism. They show that it makes sense to rethink professionalism in a way that is responsive to current complexities.

Louise Ashley analyses the impact of women entering traditionally male-dominated elite professions, focusing on corporate law and medicine. She considers how this affects the professions themselves and the forms of power they exercise in society. While the power and standing of corporate law have not eroded, and have in some places been enhanced, medicine has seen a notable erosion of autonomy, status, and bargaining capacity. She argues that these differences can be explained by how these professions are symbolically coded, and by the political–economic alignment through which they derive authority. In law, the image of the 'ideal lawyer' is still defined by such things as round-the-clock availability and working with elite clients. In medicine, by contrast, the image of 'the doctor' has been recoded toward care, with female doctors expected to offer more relational and emotional labour. Yet, these aspects of doctors' work are often discounted in audit devices that prize throughput and compliance.

Daniel Muzio recounts high-profile instances in which accountants and lawyers have not merely failed to police corporate misconduct, but in some cases have been actively facilitating or engaging in unethical and unlawful practices themselves. This is a sharp contrast to the ideal of professionals having higher ethical standards than other occupational groups. They are supposed to observe distinctive duties—such as fiduciary responsibility, confidentiality, and whistleblowing—that go beyond legal compliance. Such cases of misconduct challenge the very basis of public trust in professionalism and in the institutions that professionalism is meant to support. Muzio discusses how boundaries affect professional wrongdoing and how better regulatory systems for contemporary professionalism can be developed.

Eva Krick analyses the conditions under which we are willing to acknowledge others as experts and let them guide our actions. She compares professional knowledge and scientific expertise with the less institutionalized and credentialed, but seemingly up-and-coming kinds of knowledge: the practical, experience-based 'lay' or 'citizen expertise.' She notes that citizen expertise does not meet epistemic quality demands in the same way as scientific expertise, which is the most prestigious and widely acknowledged kind of expertise. However, there

are also similarities. Both must be evaluated according to generalized epistemic quality criteria. This raises the question: How do we know that this is a reliable expertise that we can trust? Krick argues that expert trustworthiness emanates from expert competence and integrity, which is hard to evaluate from the outside. We therefore use proxies and indicators, such as organizational affiliation and position, track record of work output, and certificates. However, such track record-based criteria represent a much bigger challenge when it comes to citizen expertise, which is per definition non-formalized and uncredentialed. Krick therefore discusses other potential proxies and shortcuts for evaluating the reliability of expertise claims.

Contributions to the rethinking of professionalism and our understanding of professions

By zooming in on specific aspects of the role of professions, their knowledge and ethics, the three contributions offer empirically grounded reflections on issues that research on professions must focus on in order to understand the meaning of professionalism in today's modern society. Despite the contributors' different angles, there are also common traits in their contributions.

First, the articles demonstrate the transformation of "classic professions" within the fields of medicine and law, taking place within the professions as well as in their relations to clients. The clients' position and power have increased, although in different ways, as people in client positions are recognized as knowledgeable, and as organizational clients, who may be more knowledgeable, powerful, and better organized than the professionals who serve them.

Second, the elevation of 'lay' or 'experiential' knowledge, described by Krick, suggests a renegotiation of the implicit social contract between experts, states, and publics, advocated by Reed and Reed, as the publics are reframed from ignorant to knowledgeable. However, the discussion of lay knowledge also indicates a continuation of the classic professional standards of what we recognise as reliable and trustworthy knowledge.

Third, the expectation that professionals hold high ethical standards—they are not merely technical implementers—features in the papers from both Ashley and Muzio. In noting the need for professionals to have integrity and a capacity to serve the public good, and not least being supported in their fiduciary role by the institutional context in which they operate, these contributions connect with Sullivan's call for the restoration of professional responsibility.

Returning to Parsons' professional complex, the contributions demonstrate that this complex no longer sufficiently represents the meaning of professionalism today. High-level and specialized competences are challenged by experiential knowledge. However, this is not a collision between incommensurable knowledge forms, seeing as professionals themselves, as ex-

pert practitioners, also rely on experiential knowledge. Professional self-regulation and collegial control have proved insufficient to regulate professional conduct, thus external regulation and sanctions other than those appealing to values seem needed.

While Noordegraaf apparently points to significant aspects of a reformulated professionalism—the involvement of the wider environments of organizational actors, clients, stakeholders, organizations, politicians, and publics in the realization of "professional services"—this involvement is neither uncomplicated nor necessarily beneficial to the mission of serving a higher good. More detailed and nuanced investigations are needed to determine if and when professionalism is a value.

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