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Symposium: Professional Complexity and the Future Study of Professions

Table of Contents

Editorial

Symposium: Professional Complexity and the Future Study of Professions

Andreas Eriksen & Tone Alm Andreassen e6497

Articles

From Guardianship to Complicity: A Boundary Perspective on Professional
Misconduct

Daniel Muzio e6462

What's the Difference? Market vs State Alignment in the Professional
Consequences of Diversity

Louise Ashley e6478

Professional Expertise, Scientific Knowledge, Citizens' Insights and Non-
Knowledge. When to Trust Experience-Based Knowledge Claims

Eva Krick e6482

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, Noordegraaf 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 it is 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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From Guardianship to Complicity: A Boundary Perspective on Professional Misconduct

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Abstract

This article explains professional misconduct through a boundary-centred ecological perspective. Although professions have historically justified their status and labour market privileges through social trusteeship and public service claims, numerous scandals—from Enron and Parmalat to the financial crisis and the opioid epidemic—reveal systematic failures of professional gatekeepers. I argue that these failures arise when boundaries within and around the system of professions are poorly designed or managed, particularly by being too weak, too strong, or too uncertain. These conditions generate mechanisms such as capture, conflicts of interest, collective myopia, double deontology, and regulatory arbitrage, leading to an increased likelihood of professional failure and misconduct. Contemporary trends such as globalisation, commercialisation, and technological change further destabilise traditional arrangements. The article concludes by advocating a configurational approach to boundary design to strengthen contemporary professional regulation.

Keywords

Professional misconduct, corporate scandals, professional boundaries, ecological approach, configurational regulation

Introduction

Professions have historically enjoyed considerable material and symbolic rewards (Larson, 1977). They benefit from market shelters such as reserved titles, restrictive arrangements, and occupational licensing, including, in some cases, full monopolies (Kleiner, 2006), which inflate the value of their services—advantages not typically afforded to other occupations. Professions also exert control over their own work and how it is performed, enjoying significant autonomy both in the workplace (Freidson, 1972) and in relation to their clients (Johnson, 1972). Indeed, professionalisation has historically functioned as a key vehicle for upward occupational mobility (Wilensky, 1964; Perkin, 2003).

Yet, these privileges are accompanied by enhanced ethical expectations. Professions have long been, and continue to be, held to higher ethical standards than other occupational groups (Gunz et al., 2015). They are governed by formal codes of ethics that impose more stringent obligations, the breach of which can result in professional sanctions. In particular, professionals are bound by distinctive duties—such as fiduciary responsibility, confidentiality, and whistleblowing—that go beyond legal compliance. They are expected to prioritise their clients' interests above their own and, in many cases, to place the public interest above all else. Moreover, these ethical obligations may extend into professionals' private lives; they may be prohibited from engaging in conduct that is permissible for others and may face more severe consequences for similar transgressions. This arrangement has been described as a regulative bargain (Cooper et al., 1988, p.8), wherein the state grants labour market protection in exchange for the profession's sustained commitment to quality and public service.

However, over the past two decades, there have been numerous high-profile instances in which professionals have violated this bargain—not merely by failing to police corporate misconduct, but in some cases by actively facilitating or engaging in unethical and unlawful practices themselves. Muzio et al. (2015) show how many major global scandals from Enron to Parmalat, from the global financial crisis to the US opioid epidemic involved the systematic and sustained failure—or active misconduct—of multiple professional occupations. These crises were not the result of isolated wrongdoing but reflected deeper, structural breakdowns in professional accountability and ethics. Crucially, they involved some of the world's most prestigious professional services firms, including leading names in law, accountancy, consultancy, and finance. In many respects, behind the world's most damaging corporate scandals, we often find the invisible—and sometimes visible—hand of the very same professions tasked with preventing these.

As such, it seems that the regulative bargain that underpins the professions is regularly breached. This is theoretically significant because it challenges the basis on which professional autonomy and authority rest. More importantly, it has real-world consequences. In financial terms, the failures and misconduct of professionals have played a role in destroying billions in public and private wealth, undermining pensions, increasing public debt, and

placing pressure on already stretched health and welfare systems. However, the effects go beyond material losses. Repeated professional failure has contributed to a wider erosion of public trust—not just in the professions themselves, but in the institutions they are meant to support. Over time, this undermines confidence in the proper functioning of markets, weakens belief in regulation and oversight, and feeds broader scepticism about the fairness and accountability of democratic and capitalist systems.

Accordingly, it is important to examine why professions appear to be increasingly breaching this tacit regulative bargain. In this conceptual piece, I address this question by adopting an ecological perspective and focusing specifically on the key boundaries that structure the system of the professions (Abbott, 1988, p.2005), and which, I argue, are increasingly under strain.

Enron vignette

Enron, created in 1985 from the merger of two natural gas firms, reinvented itself in the 1990s as a symbol of financial innovation. Based in Houston, it shifted from energy production to trading in gas, electricity, and other commodities, promoting an “asset-light” strategy that won praise from investors, consultants, and the media. By the end of the decade, Enron was hailed as one of America’s most admired companies.

The illusion collapsed on December 2nd, 2001, when Enron filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in what was then the largest corporate failure in U.S. history. Investigations revealed that management had relied on complex partnerships and off-balance-sheet vehicles to hide debt and inflate earnings. Once these arrangements came to light, confidence evaporated, destroying tens of billions in shareholder value and leaving thousands of employees without jobs or retirement savings.

Enron’s story highlights the failures of the professional “gatekeepers” charged with market oversight. Auditors, led by Arthur Andersen, repeatedly signed off on financial statements despite unconventional accounting practices and did not warn the audit committee about the risks of related-party deals (Forbes Report, 2003). Consultants, particularly McKinsey, endorsed Enron’s transformation and legitimised its “asset-light” narrative (Kipping et al., 2006). Credit rating agencies delayed action, cutting Enron’s debt to below investment grade only four days before bankruptcy. Securities analysts were also slow to react: as late as November 2001, most still recommended buying the stock, despite warning signs evident in public filings.

Enron thus revealed how professions meant to safeguard investors could instead amplify corporate deception.

Parmalat vignette

Parmalat, established in 1961 in northern Italy, expanded from a local dairy into a global food conglomerate. By the late 1990s, it operated in more than 30 countries, selling milk, juices, baked goods, and mineral water. The company presented itself as innovative and secure, and its listing on the Milan Stock Exchange since 1990 gave it credibility with international investors.

The company's downfall came on 24 December 2003, when it entered bankruptcy protection after admitting that billions in reported assets were fictitious. Investigations revealed a €14 billion shortfall, nearly twice its 2002 turnover, built on more than a decade of fabricated accounts, hidden debt, and invented financial instruments. The collapse quickly became one of Europe's largest corporate scandals, wiping out investor wealth and damaging confidence in Italian corporate governance.

A striking feature of the Parmalat affair was the failure of professional gatekeepers who should have scrutinised its practices. Auditors, led by Deloitte, endorsed the accounts year after year and only issued a disclaimer weeks before the collapse when a major offshore fund could not be verified. Credit rating agencies, notably Standard & Poor's, maintained investment-grade assessments and even upgraded Parmalat's outlook shortly before default. Financial analysts likewise misled the market: in the days preceding bankruptcy, 57 of 66 reports still recommended buying or holding the stock. Finally, banks and regulators were criticised for enabling opaque financing structures and failing to respond to red flags.

Parmalat thus exposed not only corporate misconduct but also systemic weaknesses in the very professions tasked with safeguarding market integrity.

Professional ecologies, boundaries and misconduct

Professions exist within an ecological system and are embedded in complex interdependencies with other occupational groups (Abbott, 1988; Abbott, 2005; Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). Most notably, individual professions engage in competition with adjacent occupations over the control of jurisdictions—that is, the rights to perform specific tasks and to appropriate the associated rewards. For example, accountants and lawyers compete over the provision of tax advice, psychiatrists and psychologists over the treatment of mental illness, and architects and civil engineers over the control of building projects. At the same time, professions also collaborate within complex divisions of labour. Certain groups, such as nurses or medical technicians, support others, like doctors, in delivering professional services. These relationships are marked by a dynamic interplay of cooperation and competition: occupational groups pursue shared objectives while simultaneously contesting status, authority, and control over

work. Subordinate groups seek to usurp rights and privileges from dominant ones, while incumbents actively defend these in the face of such challenges (Parkin, 1979).

Whilst initially the focus was on horizontal relationships (i.e. between different occupations), more recently there has been a realisation that professions exist within a broader set of relationships with a variety of actors including consumers, employers, regulators and educators, each with their own priorities, interests and agendas. Abbott refers to this as a linked ecology, whilst Muzio et al. (2013) view professionalisation as being enmeshed with other institutionalisation projects, such as those of the state and the large corporation. In this context, the professionalisation efforts of specific occupations are shaped, supported, and constrained by the actions of adjacent social actors with whom they regularly interact (Muzio et al., 2015). As Abbott (2005, p.247) observes, “[n]ot only does a jurisdictional tactic like licensing have to succeed in the system of professions, it also has to succeed in the ecology of the state, for quite other reasons.” For instance, the medical profession’s quest for a monopoly is much more likely to succeed if it coincides with the government’s public health policy.

At the heart of this system of broader ecological relations are boundaries. Boundaries are symbolic and material devices that constitute, differentiate and separate entities, categories and social systems (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). In the case of the professions, three types of boundaries are particularly important. “Jurisdictional” boundaries, which separate different occupational domains (e.g. accounting v. law). “Geopolitical” boundaries, which separate different national realms (e.g. the Italian and the British medical professions), and “ecological” boundaries, which separate different stakeholders (e.g. practitioners, clients and employers). Boundaries are important because they are inherently zones of contact, exchange, and potentially conflict as they mediate between different, and at times contrasting, sets of interests, values, and regulatory requirements. In particular, boundaries are often contested as different actors struggle to expand their jurisdiction, poaching work and privileges from others, or to defend it from the rival claim of competitors. As Abbott (1995, p.857) puts it, “boundaries are zones of action because they are zones of conflict.” This helps explain why professions compete not over their core jurisdictions—what Abbott calls their “heartlands”—but at the contested edges where their domains overlap. For example, lawyers and accountants do not dispute the right to audit or represent in court, but they do contest who provides tax advice. These contested zones are where professional authority is negotiated, expanded, or lost.

Viewed through this ecological lens, professional misconduct is also more likely to occur at the boundaries and can be understood as a consequence of weakening and shifting boundary structures. As jurisdictions are redrawn—whether due to endogenous contestation within the system of professions or exogenous pressures such as technological innovation and regulatory change—the institutional arrangements that once governed professional conduct may become fragmented, misaligned, or weakened. These shifts dilute accountability, create grey

zones of responsibility, and open space for new forms of opportunism at the margins of professional practice. Misconduct, in this sense, often reflects not just individual failings but the erosion of boundary structures that once anchored professional norms, enabled effective oversight, and maintained the coherence and stability of professional jurisdictions.

But how do boundaries affect professional misconduct? As we will discuss below, boundaries can be too weak, too strong or too uncertain. Each condition generates unique challenges for maintaining professional standards. We illustrate this below via a number of high-profile examples, such as the bankruptcies of Enron and Parmalat and the US opioid crisis. Whilst each case will be used to illustrate a particular problem with boundaries and how this leads to professional wrongdoing, in reality, multiple failings are entangled, which in turn makes the problem more pernicious and difficult to address.

When boundaries are too weak: Capture and conflict of interest

Boundaries are designed to keep rival interests apart so as to make sure that professional services are delivered both in the client's and in the public's best interest, with the latter in most cases outweighing the former. So, to give some examples, individual professionals should be protected in the performance of their duties from the commercial pressures exercised by their employers, suppliers or funders. Similarly, professionals should also be protected from the undue interference by the client itself. Additionally, different services and the professions that render them need to be kept apart. This could be because they have different disclosure and confidentiality standards (lawyers and accountants) or because they may have divergent interests which are difficult to reconcile (advisory versus trading services in investment banking). Accordingly, one potential issue is when boundaries become too weak and fail to separate things that need to be kept apart. In these situations, two problems may occur: capture and conflict of interest.

Capture

Historically, we thought in terms of professional dominance (Freidson, 1972) whereby knowledgeable and organised producers enjoy an asymmetric advantage over fragmented and less knowledgeable consumers (Johnson, 1972), with the purpose of professional regulation being to protect the latter from the potential abuse by the former. Whilst this problem still applies, over time the opposite issue has come to the fore. Professionals increasingly interact with other stakeholders (clients, funders, suppliers) who are more knowledgeable, powerful and better organised than themselves. These are often large multinational firms who employ in-house teams of professionals to manage their relation with outside advisors. This matters because the interests of these stakeholders may clash with the broader public obligations that bind the professions. After all, as discussed above, the status of the professions is predicated on their role as agents of the public good rather than hired guns in the hands of the highest bidder. In this context, then, the weakening of boundaries separating the professions from

other stakeholders is particularly problematic, as it may lead to the capture of the professions and to their failure to act in the public interest (Dinovitzer et al., 2014; Gabbioneta et al., 2014). This is most obvious in the case of their relationship with their clients and is highlighted by numerous examples and case studies. For instance, the failure of Enron (See Vignette 1) shows how auditors, security and credit analysts who were entrusted with preserving the integrity of the capital markets, were captured by what was one of their most powerful clients, and became complicit in its wrongdoing (Toffler, 2003; Macey & Sale, 2003). Thus, in Macey and Sale's words (2003, p.1179) "[Arthur] Andersen team members routinely succumbed to demands for certification from Enron management" at the expense of their broader deontological obligation to ensure the accuracy of financial statements. A similar story, but on a wider scale, happened in the financial crisis, when auditors and credit rating agencies endorsed complex mortgage products as safe and approved bank accounts that concealed mounting risks, thereby enabling the very excesses they were meant to restrain (Coffee, 2011; Crotty, 2009; Tett, 2009). Crotty (2009) succinctly captures the nature of the issue:

Ratings agencies are paid by the investment banks whose products they rate. Their profits therefore depend on whether they keep these banks happy [...] If one agency gave realistic assessments of the high risk associated with these securities while others did not, that firm would see its profit plummet. Thus, it made sense for investment banks to shop their securities around, looking for the agency that would give them the highest ratings and it made sense for agencies to provide excessively optimistic ratings. (p.566)

Professionals are, of course, very aware of the risk; thus to pre-empt this, they have tended to give the client what they wanted regardless of their deontological obligations and of the risks involved.

Of course, the more cynical amongst us might think that these examples are not surprising as the occupations here described present very strong market or commercial logics. Unfortunately, the same problem applies with even more fatal consequences to the medical profession. Here, the key problematic relationship is with the suppliers, i.e. the large pharmaceutical companies that provide the medicines that doctors prescribe to their patients. Here, doctors and pharmacists were persuaded by the incentives, 'bribes' and selling techniques of powerful pharmaceutical companies to forget about their Hippocratic oath, and to over-prescribe addictive and harmful opioids (oxycontin) with little monitoring, leading to an unprecedented public health emergency (Keefe, 2017; Quinones, 2015; Singh & Jayanti, 2013).

In all these cases, the weakening of boundaries allowed private interests to capture professional judgement, transforming guardians of the public good into agents of their patrons with extraordinary economic, social and political costs.

Conflict of interest

Professional services have different purposes, standards, ultimate beneficiaries, regulations and deontological rules; thus, combining them, perhaps through cross-selling strategies, is dangerous and threatens their effectiveness and integrity. This is one of the reasons why we have clear if continuously evolving boundaries separating different professional jurisdictions (Muzio et al., 2015). Yet, in a world dominated by large integrated professional services firms (Empson et al., 2015), these boundaries are becoming increasingly weak as firms try to cross-sell and bundle together different lines of professional activities.

The bankruptcy of Enron, at the time the world's biggest, clearly illustrates the dangers involved. In this case, large accountancy firms used auditing services as a loss leader to procure more lucrative consultancy work (Levitt, 2000; Muzio et al., 2015; Sikka & Willmott, 1995). The logic was that auditing was a compliance service, which clients had to pay as part of their regulatory obligations, but which was really intended to safeguard third parties (investors, contractors, etc.) rather than directly benefit the client firm itself. In this context, clients tended to see audit as a burden or intrusion and were reluctant to pay premium prices for it and as a result, auditor fees tended to be under constant pressure. Conversely, clients saw consultancy as a value adding service which could boost performance and help to deliver on strategic priorities. Therefore, professional services firms like Arthur Andersen (Enron's auditor) tended to use auditing services as a way to gain an entry point to a firm and its financial information, which would then allow them to proactively cross-sell consultancy services, which the client was eager to pay for (Grey, 2003). This created a situation in which auditing, as a public assurance and compliance service, became subordinated to consultancy, with audit partners even being rewarded for the amount of consultancy leads and referrals they generated (Grey, 2003). This fatally compromised auditor independence, as auditors were under no incentive to conduct thorough audits as required by their professional role and public duty, but exercised restraint so as not to alienate the client and to compromise the possibility of gaining lucrative consultancy contracts. This dynamic emerging from the weakening of jurisdictional boundaries is an important part of the explanation of why Enron's accounts were consistently signed off despite the presence of several warning signs (Muzio et al., 2015).

Taken together, these two processes illustrate how weak boundaries—whether by allowing capture by other stakeholders or by generating conflicts of interest within professional services—can undermine the very foundations of professional authority. Once the separation between professional judgement and private interest is breached, the profession's capacity to act as an independent guardian of the public good is fatally undermined. The result is not only episodic misconduct but the normalisation of compromised standards, which persist undetected over time and can lead to systemic and fatal consequences. We now turn to the opposite but equally serious situation when boundaries are too strong.

When boundaries are too strong: Collective myopia

Professional services are increasingly interlinked in multi-disciplinary and multinational chains of expertise. Furthermore, many professional services are reliant on the inputs of other professions. Security and credit analysts make their recommendations partly on the basis of auditors' reports. Auditors and tax advisors rely on the opinions of lawyers on the legality of specific tax planning and investment vehicles, which, in turn, consultants may sell to other clients. Often, these chains cross national boundaries as both the clients and the professional services firms involved are multinationals. In this context, it is important that professional advisors have an understanding of and can evaluate the previous steps taken by others when providing their own services. This is a problem when professional boundaries are too strong as they prevent one from seeing what happens on the other side.

This creates a situation of collective myopia where interested parties are not able to understand and evaluate previous steps on which they depend. This creates incentives to suspend their professional scepticism and uncritically trust the previous inputs of others, assuming that all is fair and proper. This creates the situation in which both genuine mistakes and intentional frauds go undetected and are propagated and amplified throughout the system. It also contributes to explaining why cases of professional misconduct are prolonged over time and systematic in nature, as they involve multiple parties (Palmer, 2012; Gabbioneta et al., 2013; 2014) who should have known better.

Whilst this problem is likely to be a contributory factor in many cases of professional misconduct, its best illustration comes from the case of Parmalat (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; 2014). Once Europe's leading dairy company, Parmalat collapsed spectacularly on December 24th, 2003, revealing a deficit of approximately €14 billion—nearly double its reported turnover for the previous year (See Vignette 2). Subsequent inquiries uncovered that the company's financial statements had been systematically fabricated throughout its 13-year tenure on the Milan Stock Exchange. During this extended period, the very professionals charged with ensuring these events did not happen either failed in their duty or consciously chose to ignore it (Muzio et al, 2015). The key issue here is that Parmalat's auditors, Deloitte, when certifying the group's accounts, relied on the individual audits of various subsidiaries, which they could not easily verify despite some warning signs. Rather, they blindly took the reports provided by others at face value. These included the audits of the French subsidiary, Bonlat, where the fraud was concealed (Gabbioneta et al., 2014). In this case, strong geopolitical boundaries between the Italian and French system, hindered collaboration and information exchanges, even if this was essential to being able to produce an accurate audit of the group as a whole.

Similar dynamics apply to jurisdictional boundaries, as both in Parmalat and Enron's cases, as well as more broadly in the financial crisis, credit and security analysts issued research notes and recommendations by blindly relying on audit reports even when there were ample

grounds for caution and suspicion. Indeed, commenting on the situation at Enron in particular, Howard Schilit, an independent analyst, concluded that “for any analyst to say there were no warning signs in the public filings, they could not have been reading the same public filings as I did” (Forbes Report, 2003). Finally, the same problem applies to the relationship between lawyers and accountants, with the latter often uncritically accepting the opinion of the former on the legality of various types of transactions and legal structure (Muzio et al., 2015). This was again the case in Enron, where Arthur Anderson did not query the use of Special Purpose Entities, as these had been cleared by their legal advisors.

These dynamics show how strong boundaries suppress collaboration and information sharing, thereby fostering collective myopia. This, in turn, prevents professionals from critically evaluating the prior work on which their own outputs depend. In such settings, both errors and misconduct can persist and spread across interconnected professions, as each actor blindly accepts the inputs of others without adequate scrutiny. This structural condition helps to explain one of the most striking characteristics of professional wrongdoing—its systematic, collective, and enduring nature.

When boundaries are uncertain: Double deontology and regulatory arbitrage

The final problem arises when it’s unclear where the boundary lies or which boundary applies. Sometimes lines overlap; sometimes they haven’t settled; sometimes coverage is patchy enough to be hard to see. This situation applies to geopolitical boundaries, as we operate in an increasingly globalised world where professional firms and their clients operate across borders (Arnold, 2005; Suddaby et al., 2007; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012). In this context, different geopolitical boundaries, between nation-states but also between national at supra-national (EU, WTO) entities, intersect with each other in complex ways. This situation may also apply in rapidly developing sectors such as AI-related professions, where again regulatory frameworks and boundaries are contested, unclear and continuously changing. In both cases, this leads to two potential problems: ambiguity, uncertainty over which rules apply and opportunism, the attempt to strategically select or even redraw boundaries on one’s own interest. Although they differ in agency and intent, both increase the likelihood of professional wrongdoing.

Double-deontology

Professional work was historically predominantly located within national jurisdictions with their associated regulatory and deontological frameworks (Larson, 1977; Burrage & Torstendahl, 1990; Krause, 1996). Historically, there was little doubt with regards to the rules that applied to an Italian lawyer or British doctor. The globalization of professional work has complicate this situation, as captured in the following quote “[Today] we might not be too surprised to find an Australian lawyer working in the Brussels office of a New York law firm on a contract for a Japanese client with a German counterpart, which is governed by English

common law, but in which disputes are to be referred to the International Chamber of Commerce's International Court of Arbitration in Paris" (Etherington & Lee, 2007, pp.96-97). Another example is offshoring (Sako, 2015), whereby professional firms undertake work for a client in cheaper overseas jurisdictions. In such situations, we have cases of double-deontology (Nagel, 2007; Nicolson & Webb, 1999) as there is uncertainty over what rules and standards apply between many potentially relevant ones. Thus, professionals may be confronted by ambiguity and are unclear about which rules and norms apply; in these situations, the possibility of genuine mistakes or unintentional ethical breaches increases (Muzio et al., 2015). This is particularly so in cases where there are incompatibilities between different national standards, such as the very different position that US or Swiss regulators take on financial disclosure and confidentiality obligations (Broom & Bandel, 2014), or the different national standards with regards to lawyer-client privilege (Widdows, 2011) or to whistleblowing duties (Christians, 2014). Another example of how double deontology can create acute ethical tension is found in humanitarian medical practice. Health organisations in this sector typically operate under strict codes of medical confidentiality intended to protect patients from harm. Yet, as Hunt (2008) shows, health professionals working in humanitarian contexts often face conflicts between such commitments and host-country legal requirements—for instance, national laws obliging doctors to report gunshot wounds to local authorities. Such circumstances generate the risk that compliance with local law may undermine professional codes and expose patients to serious dangers, including loss of trust in care or vulnerability to state action.

Regulatory arbitrage

More worryingly, situations where boundaries are too uncertain may facilitate more intentional forms of professional wrongdoing, whereby professionals engage in opportunistic types of behaviours to exploit any ambiguities to their own or to their client's advantage. This is the case of regulatory arbitrage (Coffee, 1999) whereby professionals exploit any potential gaps, loopholes, differences or conflicts in national regulatory systems, to reduce the costs of compliance, the liabilities of non-compliance or to altogether circumvent particular restrictions and engage in activities that would otherwise not be permitted. A high-profile example of regulatory arbitrage is the so-called Panama Papers (Obermayer & Obermayer, 2016; Bernstein, 2017) scandal. The leaked files revealed how the law firm Mossack Fonseca and its professional partners (including Big 4 accounting firms, other law firms, major banks and various financial professionals) around the world engineered thousands of shell companies and financial vehicles to shield clients from tax obligations and regulatory oversight. Many of these arrangements were technically legal in one jurisdiction, but in effect facilitated tax evasion, money laundering, and the concealment of politically exposed assets in others. The scandal underscored not only the reliance of global elites, including kings, presidents, prime ministers and various celebrities, on offshore structures, but also the extent to which professionals acted as enablers of misconduct by exploiting regulatory fragmentation.

The Panama Papers are just the latest high-profile example of professionals engaging in regulatory arbitrage on behalf of their clients. Following the collapse of WorldCom, a U.S. Senate investigation revealed that the Big Four had developed multiple tax “products” designed to exploit differences across jurisdictions, with little apparent regard for their broader fiduciary obligations (Sikka & Hampton, 2005, p.333). In the United Kingdom, KPMG promoted a tax avoidance scheme using Jersey as an offshore base to reduce sales tax liability—a practice subsequently deemed illegal throughout the EU (Sikka & Hampton, 2005, p.337). Indeed, the whole tax planning (or perhaps elusion) industry is based on circumventing national regulatory frameworks or exploiting the ambiguities between them.

A further illustration of regulatory arbitrage helps to explain the dynamics behind the financial crisis. This is provided by the case of Lehman Brothers’ use of the “Repo 105” transaction (Kershaw & Moorhead, 2013). After the firm’s collapse, it emerged that Lehman had relied on a legal opinion from the London office of Linklaters, which confirmed that, under English law, Repo 105 could be treated as a true sale and therefore kept off the balance sheet. This interpretation stood in contrast to U.S. law, where the same treatment would not have been permitted. By shopping for a more favourable jurisdiction, Lehman was able to present a stronger financial position than reality allowed. Crucially, Linklaters’ lawyers appear to have failed to consider how technically correct advice in one jurisdiction might be strategically exploited to enable serious misrepresentation in another. When market conditions deteriorated in 2008, this hidden leverage was revealed, accelerating Lehman’s collapse and triggering the wider contagion effects that spread throughout global financial markets. This case exemplifies how professional advice that is legally defensible in one jurisdiction can nonetheless facilitate large-scale misconduct when exploited across boundaries.

Table 1 below summarises our entire argument by linking different boundary conditions to specific instances of professional conduct via a number of distinct mechanisms. The table also lends itself to a series of more analytical observations. Firstly, distinct mechanisms apply to different types of boundaries, so arbitrage applies to geopolitical boundaries whilst capture to ecological ones, although there are some mechanisms (myopia) that cut across multiple types of boundaries. Secondly, the most egregious examples of professional misconduct such as Enron or the Great Financial Crisis. In the case of Enron, for instance, conflict of interest meant that auditors neglected their professional obligations in order to cross-sell other services, auditors and financial professionals were captured by Enron, who at the time was one of their biggest clients, and professionals blindly relied on inputs from others even when there was ground for suspicion. Finally, there are reinforcing dynamics between different mechanisms, for instance, collective myopia, whilst problematic in its own right, helps to reproduce and amplify problems caused by other boundary failures, such as by capture or conflict of interests. This is important because it means that, somewhat paradoxically, boundaries can be, at the same time, too weak and too strong. Not only did they fail to address issues like capture and conflict of interest from arising in the first place (too weak), but they also stopped

other parties from being able to detect these (too strong). This paradox explains one of the most striking characteristics of professional wrongdoing: its systematic, collective and enduring nature.

Table 1

Boundary conditions, processes, and their effects on professional conduct

Boundary condition	Mechanism	Type of boundary impacted	Description	Source of misconduct	Consequences	Illustrative examples
Too weak	Capture	Ecological (between profession and other stakeholders)	Boundaries fail to shield professionals from powerful clients, funders, or suppliers.	External interests override public obligations; professionals act as agents of others.	Compromised independence; systemic collusion; economic or public health crises.	Enron (auditors captured by client), GFC (rating agencies captured by banks), US opioid epidemic (doctors influenced by Big pharma)
Too weak	Conflict of interest	Jurisdictional (between professions)	Weak jurisdictional separation allows incompatible services to be bundled together.	Profit motives in other service lines distort judgment in core professional functions.	Compromised quality standards.	Enron (audit quality subordinated to consultancy sales)
Too strong	Collective myopia	Jurisdictional & geopolitical (between countries)	Rigid boundaries prevent scrutiny of work produced by others in the chain of expertise.	Over-reliance on upstream work; suspension of scepticism; inability to detect misconduct.	Errors/fraud propagate; prolonged crises; diluted accountability.	Parmlat (subsidiary audits unchecked), Enron (SPVs cleared by lawyers accepted uncritically)
Too uncertain	Double deontology	Geopolitical & jurisdictional	Professionals are simultaneously subject to two or more regulatory or ethical frameworks with no clear hierarchy or precedence. Compliance with one set of obligations can entail breaching another.	Conflicting codes, laws, or standards create uncertainty over which rules govern conduct in a given situation.	Increased chance of mistakes and breaches of core professional duties.	Swiss banks – U.S. disclosure (2010–12); Humanitarian Health Organizations - medical confidentiality vs. host-country mandatory reporting laws

Table 1 (Continued)

Boundary condition	Mechanism	Type of boundary impacted	Description	Source of misconduct	Consequences	Illustrative examples
Too uncertain	Regulatory arbitrage	Geopolitical	Actors exploit uncertainty to select favourable venues/standards; opinion shopping to support client interest.	Professionals allow clients to circumvent regulatory and deontological standards.	<p>Weakening of regulatory standards and enforcement leading to risky behavior.</p> <p>Rule corrodes trust in professions, clients and the overall system.</p>	Panama papers tax evasion scandal. Big Four offshore tax 'products;' Lehman Brothers Repo 105 (based on advice sourced from a more favourable jurisdiction)

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I have retold the recent history of the professions through a number of major scandals, including Enron, Parmalat, the Great Financial Crisis, and the U.S. opioid epidemic. None of these crises could have unfolded without the sustained and systematic failure of the very professional occupations and organisations tasked with preventing them in the first place. Furthermore, I show how these events are tied to failings in the design and management of professional boundaries. In this concluding section, I would like to explain why this issue is growing in significance and briefly discuss how this may be addressed.

Professional regulatory systems were institutionalised in a world where professions operated within clear national jurisdictions and where collaboration and competition with other professions were more stable and predictable. However, the last 30 years or so have brought some wide-ranging institutional changes which have unsettled traditional arrangements and undermined existing boundaries (Brock et al., 1999; Hanlon, 1998). Professional work, as we have seen, is increasingly multinational and multi-disciplinary (Suddaby et al., 2007). This means it cannot as easily be contained in traditional regulatory structures, which have tended to be national and disciplinary in scope and reach. The same dynamics apply to technological change, which allows the development of new professional services and modes of delivery which cut across established boundaries, whilst also creating new entrants with alternative business models which often challenge existing regulatory structures. Furthermore, professions and professional services firms in particular have been adopting an increasingly commercial orientation which downgrades traditional concerns with social trusteeship and public interest in favour of new priorities such as efficiency, profitability and client satisfaction (Brint, 1994; Brock et al., 1999; Leicht & Fennel, 2001; Hanlon 1998). In this case, professions are redefining themselves as technical experts who add value to clients rather than trustees of crucial skills who benefit society as a whole (Brint, 1994). This new stance inevitably poses challenges to existing regulatory structures, as professions continue to probe these either in

pursuit of their clients' interest or in search of new sources of profitability. In short, institutional change (Muzio et al., 2013) is undermining traditional boundaries and allowing professional work to break out of its regulatory shells, which in turn leads to increasing cases of professional failures and wrongdoing.

This leads us to our final issue: how can we improve the current situation? Specifically, how can we develop better regulatory systems for contemporary professionalism? Whilst I am not a regulatory expert, I hope that these suggestions can at least kick-start a conversation around this specific problem. It seems obvious from that analysis that regulatory systems which were developed when professional work was national, disciplinary and slow-evolving in nature may work less well in a world where professional services are global, multi-disciplinary and rapidly evolving. In other words, to paraphrase Aglietta (1979), professions have broken out of their regulatory shell, leading to some of the negative consequences we discussed in this paper. In this context, a different approach to professional regulation is needed.

Specifically, we need to develop both existing and new regulatory and organisational solutions to conflicts of interest, which arise when professional boundaries are too weak. Regulatory reforms such as the Sarbanes–Oxley Act in the United States were initially successful in decoupling auditing from consultancy services, but over time, the Big Four firms rebuilt substantial advisory practices. While not to the same extent as in the Enron era, this re-expansion has been implicated in a number of recent audit failures, including Thomas Cook and Wirecard. Complementing statutory measures, more effective organisational solutions are also required: systematic rotation of key personnel, more robust forms of 'Chinese walls' that ring-fence distinct lines of activity in spatially distant and separately governed units, and stricter conflict-of-interest checks at the point of client and assignment acceptance. Yet, legislative and organisational fixes alone are insufficient where professional boundaries are structurally weak. What is also required are hybrid governance models that move beyond pure self-regulation and incorporate broader ecological perspectives, including the state, other professions, and civil society. By embedding diverse expertise—potentially including international stakeholders—such arrangements can reinforce rather than dilute professional boundaries, ensuring that regulatory frameworks reflect multiple interests and cannot be captured by any single constituency.

At the same time, we must recognise that professional boundaries can also become too strong, producing silos, insularity, and collective myopia. Addressing this requires mechanisms that enable controlled permeability. For example, mandatory cross-professional audits and peer reviews across jurisdictions can expose insular practices to external scrutiny, fostering a more reflexive professional culture. Similarly, in complex multi-disciplinary projects, structured collaboration protocols are needed to ensure that professionals share knowledge effectively and avoid information hoarding. Equally important is the development of cross-national disclosure and oversight mechanisms, which address jurisdictional blind spots and ensure that global professional service firms are subject to consistent scrutiny.

Finally, we need better regulatory systems to address cases where professional boundaries are uncertain, overlapping, or contested, creating conditions for what might be termed “double deontology” or regulatory arbitrage. Here, the challenge is that professionals and firms operate across jurisdictions with divergent or only partially aligned standards. Addressing such problems requires the transnational harmonisation of key professional rules—such as those governing audit independence, disclosure practices, and fiduciary duties—so that global firms cannot exploit inconsistencies. It also calls for the creation of international oversight bodies, modelled on institutions such as the International Accounting Standards Board, that can coordinate standards and close gaps in national regimes. Equally important is sustained cooperation between national regulators to prevent forum shopping and ensure that transnational practices are subject to consistent scrutiny.

Overall, new regulatory systems need to adopt what Langley et al. (2019) describe as a configurational approach to boundary design and management. This perspective rests on the recognition that, in complex systems, certain activities and domains need to be brought together, while others must be kept apart even more firmly. Accordingly, some boundaries should become more flexible and porous, others reinforced and strengthened, and still others selectively bridged to enable coordination. Crucially, such boundary configurations are not static but must be continually adjusted in response to shifting professional, organisational, and societal dynamics.

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What's the Difference? Market vs State Alignment in the Professional Consequences of Diversity

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Abstract

Across the UK and industrialised West, corporate law and medicine have diversified according to gender, yet their power has moved in opposite directions. This article asks what difference diversification makes to professions and the forms of power they exercise, with diversification defined here primarily as the increased representation of women and thus quantitative change. While mainstream accounts emphasise a 'business case' for diversity, which is expected to deliver organisational benefits such as productivity and performance, research on occupational segregation shows that demographic shifts can reduce occupational status even when outcomes remain equal. This paper brings related theories into dialogue with the sociology of the professions, using corporate law and medicine to argue that the effects of diversification vary by alignment: market-aligned law assimilates diversity as managed legitimacy to maintain power and hierarchy, while state-aligned medicine interprets or constructs feminisation as devaluation under audit and austerity. The paper advances a framework for understanding when diversity legitimises, destabilises, or enhances professions' capacity to serve the public good.

Keywords

Occupational Segregation, Professions, Law, Legitimacy, Medicine

Introduction

In recent decades, elite professions have been closely engaged with diversification, understood here primarily as a shift away from the historic dominance of middle-class, white, male entrants, and thus in quantitative terms. On one reading, diversification of this sort is evidence of progress, suggesting that barriers are dismantled, opportunities widened, and professions modernised in step with broader social change (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Plaut, 2010). On another, stubborn inequalities of gender, ethnicity, and class prompt critical questions about why reforms have not gone further (Ahmed, 2012; Sommerlad, 2016; Tatli et al., 2013) and, from a mainstream, practice-oriented perspective, how to design initiatives that deliver more than cosmetic change (Bridge Group, 2018; 2020; Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Progress Together, 2023; McKinsey, 2023).

While literature in both traditions is influential and valuable, this article starts with a different question. Namely, what difference has diversification made to professions themselves and, particularly, to the forms of power they are able to exercise in society? Where the sociology of the professions and the critical diversity literature have previously intersected, this question has been relatively neglected to date. Nevertheless, it is important, first, because professional power is never neutral: it can serve as a bulwark for the public good but can also entrench privilege and profit (Saks, 2021), to shape resources, standards, and advocacy in ways that affect citizens' lives. Further, the occupational segregation literature shows that status and power are closely tied to the status of those conventionally associated with the role. In the industrialised West, white, middle-class men continue to enjoy the highest aggregate status, and diversification away from this norm can be culturally read as downgrading both status and authority (Ashcraft, 2013; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Ridgeway, 2011; Levanon et al., 2009).

This analysis hints at a puzzle. Over recent decades, 'elite' professions such as corporate law and medicine have diversified along similar lines, especially with respect to gender, yet the fortunes of these fields have diverged: while the former has arguably maintained, and in places enhanced, its power and standing (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012; Nelson, 2022), medicine has seen a notable erosion of autonomy, status, and bargaining capacity (e.g. Nettleton, 2020). This has been illustrated by indicators such as high revenues, and profit per equity partner (PEP) reaching £6 million per annum for some corporate lawyers (Legal Cheek, 2024), versus pay restraint, audit intensity, and industrial action in UK medicine, where this analysis is focused (Waters, 2022). Clearly, diversification is not solely responsible for these trends, as for example, marketisation, audit regimes, regulatory change, and broader political and economic shifts matter too. However, to the extent diversification is implicated, these patterns suggest that neither the causes nor the effects are uniform, and that, further, a reduction in power alongside diversification is not inevitable.

To help explain this puzzle, I build on and integrate two theoretical strands. First, I draw from the occupational segregation literature, especially Ashcraft's (2013) notion of the 'glass slipper,' which treats professions as symbolically coded identities as well as knowledge systems: occupations are tethered to an imagined incumbent (in 'elite' occupations, typically implicitly masculine), such that who appears to 'fit' the role helps constitute what the role is worth. However, as I will show, shifts in who does the work may have different impacts on what the role is taken to mean by internal and external audiences, with different consequences for status and authority even when competence and outcomes are unchanged.

To help illustrate these points, second, I extend Reed's (2018) analysis of professions under neoliberal state-corporate governance to construct a simple alignment heuristic, distinguishing between professions which are primarily market-aligned (with authority anchored in service to capital), others which are state-aligned (with authority delegated by statute and sustained by public trust), and others which are public-aligned (with authority grounded in civic service and democratic accountability). These are ideal rather than hard types, but they are useful here because alignment shapes governance and valuation regimes or, in other words, the judgement devices, metrics, and narratives that make professional value legible (Fourcade & Healy, 2017; Karpik, 2010). Crucially for my argument, this alignment also conditions how similar demographic shifts are interpreted or 'read' by wider audiences.

While I distinguish three ideal-typical alignments, market, state, and public, the empirical analysis here focuses on the first two. This is a methodological choice designed to maximise analytic contrast while holding constant a high degree of professionalisation, licensing, and elite status in the UK. Corporate law and medicine are both long-established, high-status professions. However, they anchor authority in sharply different sites: one in markets and client capital, the other in state delegation and public trust. This makes them analytically comparable while still illustrating divergent logics of valuation. By contrast, public-aligned occupations such as teaching or social work differ more fundamentally in occupational structure, collective organisation, and democratic accountability, so that including them would require a broader evidentiary base than possible here.

As such, corporate law and medicine are the focus here, as exemplars of market and state alignment, respectively. I suggest that in the former, diversification has proceeded largely via assimilation, leaving the canonical masculine identity intact and thereby contributing to and helping to protect power. In medicine, by contrast, diversification, and particularly feminisation, has proceeded via recoding towards 'care' (Pringle, 1998), shifting what the role is taken to mean and having a dampening effect on status and autonomy. These processes are connected to alignment because law, as a market-aligned profession, is judged through devices such as billable hours, origination credit, and profitability metrics, which reward extreme availability and client networks, thus preserving this masculine, elite template and translating visible inclusion into 'managed legitimacy' (Suchman, 1995). Here, legitimacy is understood

in less positive terms, as something that is actively curated, displayed, and commodified, often through awards, rankings, or disclosure practices, in ways that reinforce rather than unsettle underlying distributions of power. Put differently, legitimacy here is not absent, but selectively produced and deployed as a *reputational technology*. This is in contrast to medicine, the public image of which has reorientated towards care, a shift which has collided with a measurement system that discounts related activities, in favour of tools such as throughput, waiting-time compliance, and guideline adherence. As a result, this recoding is more likely to be read as diminished authority.

The core argument is not that diversification is problematic per se. On the contrary, widening access remains ethically vital and socially necessary. Rather, I use these cases to argue that the effects of diversification on legitimacy and power are mediated first, by how occupations are symbolically coded, and second, by the political-economic alignment through which they derive authority.

The contribution is primarily theoretical. I link Ashcraft's (2013) symbolic lens with the sociology of the professions (e.g. Reed, 2018), by specifying an alignment heuristic that conditions whether diversification stabilises or unsettles professional authority. Critically, while recoding has previously been used to explain how diversification reshapes the symbolic identity of a profession (Ashcraft, 2013), it does not in itself explain why similar shifts are stabilising in some fields but destabilising in others. The alignment heuristic, therefore, adds value, as by specifying whether professional authority is anchored in markets, states, or publics, it highlights the political-economic context through which symbolic shifts are evaluated, priced, and policed. In this way, alignment helps to account for the divergent consequences of diversification across professions, not in a deterministic or mechanical way, but as it conditions how identity coding interacts with evaluation regimes and external audiences, a point to which I return. First, though, I expand on a conceptual framework that brings together gender-coding and alignment. I then examine how corporate law instrumentalises diversity as managed legitimacy, and how medicine's diversification has been read as devaluation under audit and austerity. I conclude by considering how diversity must be paired with redistribution, professional voice, and democratic accountability if it is to enhance, rather than legitimise or diminish, the professions' capacity to serve the public good.

Conceptual framework: Diversity, legitimacy, and the professional project

The sociology of professions has long been preoccupied with how professions secure special status and power. In classic accounts, this is the outcome of organised projects to monopolise expertise, win jurisdiction, and convert autonomy into material and symbolic rewards. Professions construct closure around abstract knowledge via credentialing, licensure, and examinations, defend jurisdiction against competitors through claims of exclusive competence, and sustain organisational control via collegial institutions that regulate entry, discipline, and

standards (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Larson, 1977). Their authority depends as much on legitimation as on technique: historically, professions have presented themselves as disinterested servants of the public, worthy of trust and discretion, and, when audiences accept those claims, legitimacy confers the right to decide and to be deferred to (Suchman, 1995; Scott, 2013). Status and power are thus intertwined. Status, defined here as relative prestige grounded in widely held status beliefs, attracts deference and resources while deference sustains autonomy, jurisdictional settlements, and bargaining strength (Podolny, 2010).

Professional power is therefore not simply technical competence but a durable settlement among knowledge, organisation, audiences, and the state. This logic maps onto wider labour-market analyses, if we treat professions as securing rents by combining three streams of value. Following Fevre (1992), we can distinguish work values (what workers can do), market values (what positions and clients they can command), and people values (what identities and cultural signals they can credibly perform). Work values correspond to apparently objective measures of human capital (Becker, 1964), or formal expertise, qualifications, and craft that justify claims to jurisdiction. Taking a sociological perspective and drawing from the work of Bourdieu (e.g. 1984), market values map to ‘social capital,’ such as network position, client capture, and platform effects that stabilise demand and raise switching costs. People values align with ‘cultural capital,’ to include embodied dispositions, accent, comportment, gendered/racialised/classed ‘fit,’ and the symbolic cues that elicit trust and deference. Professions differ in how they weight these streams, but power and legitimacy are generally produced at their intersection: human capital anchors the technical claim, social capital secures market position and political access, and cultural capital converts identity cues into status and credibility (Ashley, 2022).

In making these points, my analysis differs somewhat from classic accounts within the sociology of the professions, where legitimacy has generally been interpreted as a positive condition (Suchman, 1995). In contrast, I build on previous work (Ashley, 2022) to capture a more instrumental dynamic, where visible diversity functions less as substantive redistribution of opportunity or decision rights, and more as a symbolic resource that reassures clients, regulators, and recruits that the profession is meritocratic and modern.

This framing, especially the emphasis on people values, also helps explain why who does the work can affect what the work is judged to be worth, as shown by the literature on occupational segregation. When women enter an occupation in significant numbers, pay premia, prestige, and authority often decline regardless of task content, a pattern attributed to status beliefs, employer devaluation, and the reclassification of skill (Busch, 2018; Charles, & Grusky, 2005; Levanon et al., 2009; Reskin & Roos, 1990). Feminisation tends to proceed unevenly, as women’s presence grows fastest in care-intensive, relational, and public-facing roles, and slowest in high-discretion, high-rent niches, and wage and authority penalties are compounded where evaluative criteria reward ‘ideal worker’ availability and adversarial poise

(Acker, 1990; Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Ridgeway, 2011). The key inference is that diversification can undermine occupational power and status, not because new entrants are less capable, but because audiences recalibrate the occupation's value when its demographic profile shifts.

Karen Ashcraft's (2013) 'glass slipper' metaphor develops this argument by showing that elite occupations are tethered to an ideal or 'figurative' practitioner, typically implicitly masculine, and that identity and value are co-constitutive: the imagined incumbent helps define what counts as skill, how it is recognised, and to whom deference is owed. When diversification alters who is seen to 'fit' the role, the identity of the imagined incumbent shifts too, with potential consequences for the occupation's symbolic worth and authority. In this way, the 'glass slipper' captures the mechanism through which diversification can recode a profession's identity, and why the same work may be reinterpreted as less prestigious or less authoritative when associated with historically lower-status groups.

Again, this underlines how power and status are not anchored independently in the technical content of work but are mediated by who is seen to fit the role. This matters acutely in elite professions where exclusivity and inclusivity pull in opposite directions: exclusivity supports closure and status, while inclusivity is increasingly required for legitimacy, with both important to sustaining power (Ashcraft et al., 2012). As I have shown in a previous study, (Ashley, 2022), this means that diversity agendas aimed at becoming more inclusive often cut across the very mechanisms of closure on which professional prestige has depended, producing a delicate balancing act. In fields like corporate law and accountancy, that balance has often been managed as firms become sufficiently diverse to bolster legitimacy but not so much as to unsettle status. Whether a comparable dynamic exists in medicine has been less systematically analysed, though this points to the puzzle at the heart of this paper. In short, why similar demographic shifts, relating in this case particularly to gender, have unfolded across professions, yet trends in professional power have diverged.

Corporate law and medicine make useful comparators here, as demographic shifts are broadly similar. Progression remains stratified in both, with women and ethnic-minority practitioners less represented in senior, more remunerated niches, and entrants from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds more likely to be found in lower-status and less well-paid roles (Ashley & Macdonald, 2024; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Kumwenda et al., 2019). However, it is also the case that both *have* diversified in quantitative terms, especially with respect to gender. Women now represent around half of all lawyers in corporate firms (SRA, 2025), and over 50% of all doctors with a license to practice in the UK (GMC, 2025). Yet the trajectories of these professions differ. UK corporate law has consolidated economic and organisational power, indicated as top-100 firms report record revenues and strong profitability metrics (including profits per equity partner, or PEP), and the market has continued to concentrate at the top end, signalling persistent or enhanced bargaining strength (The Lawyer, 2024). By contrast, UK medicine shows weakening professional power, as illustrated by prolonged

real-terms pay erosion, intensified audit/target regimes, and recurrent industrial action, along with diminished bargaining capacity and narrowed discretion (Gabe and Elston, 2022; Nettleton, 2020).

Clearly, and as already noted, this contrast is not reducible to diversification, yet previous analyses would suggest it is implicated at least, both as a cause of these changes, and an effect. To make sense of how this has happened, I combine the symbolic lens of occupational segregation with a political-economy view drawn especially from Reed's (2018) analysis of professions under neoliberal state-corporate governance, which locates professional authority in shifting settlements among state, corporate, and administrative elites.

Building on that foundation and noting that all professions continue to rely on state-enforced jurisdiction and legitimacy, I propose an alignment to capture more patterned variation in how professions anchor authority. As outlined in the introduction, some are primarily market-aligned, others are state-aligned, and a third group is public-aligned. I suggest that as ideal types, these categories help illustrate how alignment shapes how changes in demographic composition are valued by wide audiences. Put simply, identity coding conditions the signals of worth, while alignment is one factor conditioning how those signals are priced and policed through prevailing regimes of evaluation and control.

To operationalise these themes, I apply this framework to corporate law and to medicine, by tracing how identity coding is reproduced or unsettled in recruitment imagery, partner biographies, and internal communications (Ashley & Empson, 2017; Sommerlad, 2016), and by mapping alignment considering how value is commensurated and made valuable. Here, commensuration refers to the conversion of professional activities into comparable metrics that enable pricing, ranking, and control, which vary by alignment, and thus mediate how the same demographic shifts are interpreted and rewarded (Fourcade & Healy, 2017; Karpik, 2010; Power, 1997; Mazzucato, 2018). In law, such devices include billable hours, realisation rates, origination credit, league tables, and profitability metrics (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021), while in medicine, they include targets, dashboards, audits and inspection regimes (Vega & Cunha, 2023). The expectation is that where market commensuration rewards a stable elite template, and organisations retain control over evaluation, as in law, diversification has been more readily assimilated as managed legitimacy. In contrast, where audit-centred commensuration discounts care and narrows practitioners' discretionary space, as in medicine, diversification, and especially feminisation, has also exposed the work to some institutional discounting.

These are probabilistic, not deterministic tendencies, a point to which I will return. An important caveat is also that I compare the medical profession as a whole with just one segment of the legal profession, and do not include a public-aligned occupation in this analysis. To reiterate, the latter is justified to maximise analytic contrast while holding constant a high degree of professionalisation, licensing, and elite status in the UK. The former is justified as

UK medicine is organised, licensed, and governed as a single statutory profession, so that major reforms of audit, targets, and funding affect the profession in its entirety, and feminisation is system-wide. By contrast, the legal profession spans multiple alignments, such as criminal, family, legal aid, and public law, which are more state and/or public-aligned, and corporate, which is market-aligned. My argument turns on how alignment conditions how diversification is interpreted or 'read', in relation to which, using the market-aligned core of law, and focusing on large corporate firms handling M&A, finance, funds, PE, avoids mixing heterogeneous logics and provides a clean comparator to state-aligned medicine. It also captures where legal power and commensuration are most concentrated and where diversity and inclusion is most visibly deployed. This asymmetry is therefore a methodological choice, though a fuller mapping of other legal segments could be an area for possible future work.

With those qualifications in mind, the analysis aims to advance the sociology of the professions by treating diversification not merely as representational, but as one influence on professional power, shaping jurisdictional reach, organisational discretion, political influence, and cultural deference. Taking this approach moves us beyond the well-rehearsed 'business case' for diversity, which is widespread in mainstream academic and practitioner literature, and argues that more diverse teams improve performance, innovation, or client service, and is often used in practitioner discourse to justify inclusion initiatives (e.g. Ely & Thomas, 2001; McKinsey, 2023). This is separate from the social justice case, which sees widening access as an ethical imperative grounded in fairness and equality of opportunity (Noon 2007), while a critical perspective emphasises the limits of both, showing how diversity initiatives may reproduce inequality, function symbolically, or even reinforce elite privilege (Ahmed, 2012; Ashley, 2022). My analysis builds on this critical strand but extends it by shifting the question from whether diversity is 'good' or 'bad,' to how its consequences vary depending on the political-economic alignment of the profession, and how symbolic readings of demographic change are mediated by the devices through which professional value is judged.

Again, previous literature has addressed some overlapping concerns, including where claims have been made that diversification is straightforwardly 'good' for society. As one example, the so-called 'Lehman Sisters' thesis suggests women financiers are likely to take fewer risks, such that more gender diversity in financial services may have prevented 2008's financial crash (Prügl 2012). One problem with such claims is that they are under-evidenced and risk holding women and minoritised practitioners to higher moral or performance standards. The approach here is more nuanced, as it relates diversification to professional power and its variable effects. I apply these themes to corporate law next.

Law: Inclusion as institutional legitimacy

In the corporate legal sector, diversification arguably operates, in aggregate, as a form of 'managed legitimacy', or a pattern of visibly improved entry coupled with persistent, stratified command posts. To put this another way, while the sector is now more diverse on grounds of

gender, ethnicity and, to a smaller extent, socio-economic background, related changes have been carefully controlled, in ways which I suggest help to stabilise, and in places enhance, market power.

To recap on figures first, and continuing to focus on gender, in England and Wales, women account for about 47% of lawyers working in corporate law (compared with 62% of solicitors overall), yet they hold only 32% of full-equity partner posts across firms, and c.28% in the largest firms (Beioley, 2020; SRA, 2025). In the United States, women now make up just over half of associates (50.31% in 2023), but only c.28% of all partners and c.25% of equity partners (Weiss, 2024). Despite change at the top being relatively slow, women have then become better represented in corporate over the last twenty years, and these improvements are repeatedly showcased through awards, rankings and glossy disclosures, where they function as assurance signals to clients, potential recruits and regulators that firms are open to all talent and thus meritocratic and fair (Ashley, 2022). This signalling has material channels as, for example, many in-house legal departments now request related information from their advisors and/or benchmark outside counsel via diversity instruments. In the US, this includes the ABA Model Diversity Survey (ABA, 2024), while in the UK, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) requires firms in England and Wales to collect and publish diversity data, creating reputational and procurement-side pressure for visible inclusion.

Over the same period, elite UK firms have posted record revenues and strong profits-per-equity-partner, which might be read as external markers of authority and strength (Ryan, 2024). Again, these patterns do not imply that diversification has *caused* revenue and PEP growth. Instead, visible inclusion has arguably been successfully packaged in ways which help secure legitimacy and thus licence to operate, without materially redistributing decision rights within these firms, such as equity share and control over the highest value mandates. A second important channel through which power has been protected (and perhaps enhanced) concerns the pathway of diversification, which in corporate law is best described as assimilation rather than recoding. The canonical figure of the ‘ideal lawyer’, defined by an adversarial approach, round-the-clock availability, and ease working with elite clients, often also male, continues to organise evaluation and advancement in highly paid and more remunerative sections (Ashley & Empson, 2017). In Ashcraft’s (2013) terms, the glass slipper remains intact, as newcomers are welcomed to the extent they can perform the existing identity. Yet, the occupation’s symbolic core is not meaningfully de-gendered (Sommerlad, 2016). In Táíwò’s (2022) terms, diversification represents a form of ‘elite capture’ where a measure of inclusion takes place though without material redistribution.

However, beyond identity coding, market alignment helps explain why these dynamics are so durable. Under financialisation, corporate law’s legitimacy is anchored in service to capital, or the dealmaking, financing, and structuring needs of transnational clients (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012; Morgan & Quack, 2005). In this setting, value is rendered legible through devices that price performance through the existing identity, as they reward those who can mobilise

elite networks, deliver extreme availability, and capture high-margin work, behaviours historically coded as masculine in this field (Ashley, 2022; Sommerlad, 2016). Because the valuation regime remains unchanged, assimilation is rational for firms and entrants, and recoding of the occupational identity is neither rewarded nor required. The same alignment makes diversity and inclusion an efficient legitimacy technology, as global clients, especially financial institutions with Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) compliance requirements, seek suppliers who can demonstrate cultural competence and reputational safety, and firms can satisfy that demand with visible headcounts and convincing narratives (Ashley, 2022; Sommerlad & Ashley, 2015).

In short, market alignment sustains assimilation and incentivises diversity as this form of ‘managed legitimacy,’ resulting in an occupation that diversifies without de-gendering, preserving its masculine-coded identity, and consolidating economic and organisational power. This is in contrast to state-aligned medicine, where audit-centred commensuration makes recoding toward care more easily read as devaluation under hostile political-economic conditions, which I explain next.

Medicine: Inclusion, devaluation, and disempowerment

Historically, medicine has been seen as the paradigmatic professional project: the occupation that most fully translated an abstract knowledge base, collegial self-regulation, and moral claims of service into durable authority and material reward (Larson, 1977). In the UK, the post-1948 settlement entrenched this position through high trust, a strong voice in standard-setting, and institutionalised autonomy via the General Medical Council, as the profession’s regulator, and royal colleges (Stewart, 2008; Witz, 1992). In recent decades, however, financialised governance has shifted the balance from occupational to organisational professionalism: quasi-markets, contracting, and an audit explosion have reframed judgement as performance against targets, narrowing professional autonomy and discretion, and weakening bargaining power (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Evetts, 2003). Real-terms pay restraint and workload intensification have followed even as accountability demands multiplied. In the model developed earlier, UK medicine sits close to the state-aligned pole, as authority is historically delegated by statute and sustained by public trust, and value is judged through audit regimes rather than client markets.

These institutional shifts have unfolded alongside marked demographic change. As noted, similar to corporate law, women now constitute just over half of UK-licensed doctors. The workforce has also become more international and racially diverse, though socio-economic inclusion remains limited, notwithstanding widening-participation efforts (Kumwenda et al., 2019; Medical Schools Council, 2024). To reiterate, diversification of this sort is not intrinsically problematic. To the contrary in fact as, in clinical terms, large observational studies associate women physicians and surgeons with equal or better patient outcomes (e.g. Wallis et al., 2023). The claim advanced here is narrower and conditional, as I suggest demographic

change contributes to and amplifies status erosion under conditions of audit, austerity, and managerial control. Related mechanisms are most clearly evidenced or ‘visible’ perhaps when considering gender, though may also apply to ethnicity, international medical graduates (IMG), and class.

Considering gender first, as previously noted, a large comparative literature links feminisation to subsequent devaluation, measured in terms such as declines in pay premia and prestige regardless of task content, consistent with status-belief dynamics (Levanon et al., 2009). In medicine, feminisation has advanced fastest in care-intensive fields, such as general practice, paediatrics, psychiatry, and public health, and slowest in high-prestige procedural specialties, such as surgery, patterns attributed in qualitative and quantitative studies primarily to structural barriers and status beliefs rather than ‘natural preferences’ (Pringle, 1998, Riska, 2010). Read through Ashcraft’s (2013) glass slipper metaphor, who is imagined to ‘fit’ the role helps constitute the role’s value: as more women enter, the imagined incumbent of ‘the doctor’ recodes toward care, also encouraged as female doctors were historically expected to offer more relational and emotional labour, along with advocacy, and time to listen, as they joined the profession (Pringle, 1998). However, while these attributes are culturally lauded and valued by patients as, for example, they suggest more empathy, they are often discounted in audit devices that prize factors such as patient throughput and compliance (Ashley & McDonald, 2024).

Under austerity, this symbolic downgrading intersects with tighter managerial control, including rota rules, guideline proliferation, inspection, and reputational league tables, to systematically narrow discretionary space. Arguably, this interaction amplifies losses of status and autonomy beyond what either factor would produce alone and coincides with pay structures and working-time norms, gendered patterns of part-time working, caregiving breaks, and concentration in salaried posts (versus partnership-style private roles) which feed wage-gap and seniority dynamics that audiences may misread as diminished commitment, despite strong clinical performance.

For ethnicity and international training, some similar elements are well established, while others remain hypotheses to be tested with empirical research. It is well documented, for example, that international medical graduates (IMGs) and UK-trained minority doctors experience differential attainment (Woolf, 2020), higher bullying/harassment exposure and discrimination (Healey et al., 2025), and higher rates of referral to regulators (Dyer, 2023). The segmentation is structural, as IMGs are disproportionately recruited into shortage specialties, hard-to-staff hospitals, and under-resourced regions, the very roles that bear the brunt of targets and vacancy pressure (Beduchaud et al., 2024). What remains to be demonstrated is an audience-effect mechanism analogous to gender. In other words, that controlling for task content and resourcing, the same work is valued less, and therefore attracts weaker prestige

or bargaining power, when associated with racialised or foreign-trained practitioners. If confirmed, this would help explain why inclusion advances most rapidly in areas of practice already exposed to institutional discounting under audit and austerity.

Considering socio-economic background or class, working-class entrants remain a small minority, and widening-participation initiatives have moved the needle less in medicine than in many other elite pathways (MSC, 2024). Existing research does, though, demonstrate that constrained choice under unequal conditions channels those who do enter toward lower-status, care-heavy niches and peripheral geographies (Ashley & McDonald, 2024; Kumwenda et al., 2019). It is plausible at least that these patterns make those niches more vulnerable to devaluation and reduce system-level bargaining power. Class dynamics also inflect identity work, or the performance of ‘appropriate’ professional self-presentation, such as accent, bearing, ease with institutional codes, which remains a tacit criterion of credibility in high-status settings, and misalignment here can compound gendered and racialised readings of competence (Ashley & McDonald, 2024). To reiterate, this should not imply that inclusion *causes* decline. Rather, under hostile political-economic conditions, diversification interacts with audit and austerity to amplify erosion through symbolic channels, via recoding toward care that is institutionally discounted.

Discussion: Inclusion, inequality, and the public interest

The comparison offered here shows how diversification does not have uniform effects but interacts with alignment and evaluation regimes to shape professional power. In corporate law, market alignment has enabled visible inclusion to function as managed legitimacy, reinforcing profit and hierarchy without altering the profession’s symbolic core. In medicine, state alignment has made feminisation more vulnerable to symbolic devaluation, as recoding toward care collides with audit and austerity, eroding autonomy despite strong patient outcomes. The contrast illustrates the central claim, that the impact of diversification on legitimacy and authority depends not only on who enters but also on how alignment conditions the symbolic reading of demographic change.

This paper shifts the debate on the benefits or otherwise of diversity, away from a narrow ‘business case’ and toward a broader question: what social difference does diversification make once we consider where professional authority is anchored and how value is decided? While probabilistic rather than deterministic, the answer is paradoxical, to suggest that in some respects, diversity matters far too much for professional power, while in others, it matters not enough, with the balance conditional on alignment, commensuration regimes, and audience status beliefs.

To expand on this paradox, diversity arguably matters too much where the demographic composition of a profession is tightly coupled to its symbolic status and institutional power. As Ashcraft’s (2013) ‘glass slipper’ suggests, when an occupation becomes feminised or more socio-economically diverse, entrenched status beliefs can recode the role and reinterpret the

work itself as less prestigious or less valuable. These readings are not intrinsic to those who enter, but instead reflect wider cultural hierarchies of gender, class, race, and worth. I have argued that in medicine, a state-aligned profession, such interpretations meet an already hostile political-economic environment of audit, austerity, and managerial control. The result is a compound effect, as symbolic devaluation, under-investment, and diminished advocacy capacity have consequences for public trust and for the resources needed to do the job well. In this sense, inclusion can be turned against itself when it is read as a dilution of authority rather than a deepening of representativeness and care.

Conversely, diversity can matter for professional power much less when it is assimilated as a substitute for structural reform. In corporate law, a market-aligned profession, diversity is often managed as a reputational technology (Ashley, 2022). In other words, firms present themselves as progressive and meritocratic and thereby strengthen their licence to operate while leaving core distributions of profit, decision-making, and client power more-or-less intact. Crucially, corporate law has diversified without de-gendering its identity. The 'ideal lawyer' remains coded as elite and implicitly masculine (Sommerlad, 2016), and newcomers largely succeed by assimilating to that template. Diversity here functions as symbolic reassurance, deflecting critique and shoring up legitimacy without requiring redistribution or changing how value is created and extracted.

The analysis, therefore, suggests that recoding and alignment are complementary rather than competing explanations. Recoding highlights how demographic change can shift what an occupation is taken to mean; alignment shows how such shifts are read within wider governance regimes. Without alignment, we might assume that diversification always erodes power through devaluation. By contrast, the alignment model demonstrates why the same symbolic shifts may be absorbed as legitimacy in market-aligned fields yet interpreted as weakness in state-aligned ones. Crucially, alignment is not deterministic, as it shapes tendencies, but outcomes also depend on contingencies such as fiscal regimes, and institutional histories.

Set against these readings, a broader question emerges, namely, how are professional activities priced and ranked in ways that make diversity appear either destabilising or inconsequential? The argument here is that the devices that make value legible, including billable hours and origination credit, league tables and profitability metrics in corporate law, and audit targets, performance dashboards, and cost-throughput indicators in medicine, systematically over-valorise activities that secure private returns while under-recognising public value (Mazzucato, 2018). Put another way, in corporate law, these commensuration regimes inflate the worth of work that reproduces capital's priorities, making diversity and inclusion a legitimacy technology that changes little else. This is problematic to the extent that, from a normative perspective, the power of corporate law is not entirely benign, as the same capacities that enable complex coordination and contract enforcement also structure tax arbitrage, regulatory circumvention, and the insulation of private wealth from public accountability (Seabrooke & Wigan, 2016). In medicine, the stakes are similarly not solely occupational.

Medicine is a public-service profession whose power has sometimes been used against patients, for example, through defensive boundary-work, gatekeeping that protects professional privilege, or very high private fees in certain contexts (Willis, 2020). Yet some power is arguably necessary for medicine to defend patients' interests against short-term managerialism and political austerity. The irony is that precisely when medicine requires robust professional power to advocate for staffing, safety, and time to care, its status is weakened by the interaction of hostile political economy and the recoding toward care. The problem is not then more diversity and inclusion, but how both are received and governed within unequal systems.

Conclusion: What kind of difference should diversity make?

Diversity is ethically vital and politically necessary, but this article suggests its social value depends at least in part on how diversification interacts with where power sits. The paradox is then that in some contexts, diversity matters far too much, when demographic change is misinterpreted as devaluation, while in others, it matters not enough, when absorbed as symbolic legitimization without structural change.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is to link classic analyses of occupational closure and control with Ashcraft's (2018) 'glass slipper' and accounts of professions under neoliberal state-corporate governance (e.g. Reed, 2018), extending that synthesis by specifying an alignment heuristic, delineating between market, state and public, and the commensuration devices through which value is priced.

I have focused primarily on gender, which provides the clearest empirical evidence for the dynamics traced here, though the framework is not confined to gender alone. Other axes of diversification, including race and ethnicity, socio-economic background, and international training, may similarly interact with alignment and symbolic coding to shape professional power. For example, international medical graduates are disproportionately channelled into lower-status and under-resourced niches, where their work is more vulnerable to institutional discounting, and class background continues to influence credibility, access to high-value work, and professional progression in both law and medicine (Ashley and McDonald, 2024). Future research should therefore test the transferability of this account across multiple dimensions of diversity, examining when symbolic readings of demographic change reinforce inequality and when they can instead underpin more democratic and redistributive forms of professional authority.

It is important to underline once again that the tendencies described here may not be universal. Market-aligned fields might experience status slippage when professional work is commodified or where there is strong buyer power, for example, in statutory audit, while state-aligned fields can buffer devaluation where multiple payers or robust collective bargaining persist, as is evident in some segments of US medicine. However, rather than undermining the argument advanced in this paper, these cases arguably help highlight key levers, such as

audit intensity, fiscal regime, client concentration, and institutional histories of gender-coding, through which alignment and commensuration interact with diversification.

I also note that the account provided here is UK-centred. While comparable tensions are evident across the industrialised West, as already explained, scope conditions matter. On this basis, future work could probe when symbolic readings of diversification travel, how market/state alignments shape returns to inclusion, and which combinations of representation, redistribution, autonomy, and accountability best align professional power with public purpose. Until such conditions are met, the risk remains that diversity will either be weaponised to devalue state-aligned professions or instrumentalised to legitimate market-aligned ones.

To reiterate, the stakes of diversification are public, not merely organisational. As noted, corporate legal expertise can solve complex problems but also entrench inequality and, while medical authority can be used parochially, some durable professional power is necessary to secure resources, resist corrosive marketisation, and advocate for patients. One practical implication is to move beyond representation-as-endpoint. If we care about what professions can do for society, inclusion must be paired with redistribution, autonomy, and accountability. For corporate law, that could mean stronger democratic oversight of legal architectures that enable extraction, such as transparency over ownership and tax engineering, limits on regulatory arbitrage, and responsibility for downstream social effects. For medicine, it could mean restoring meaningful professional voice in service design and staffing while coupling autonomy to safeguards against uses of power that disadvantage patients, securing transparent outcomes, equitable access, and fair fees. Overall, the task is not to abandon diversity and inclusion, but to anchor it in reforms that redistribute power and re-centre the public interest.

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Professional Expertise, Scientific Knowledge, Citizens' Insights and Non-Knowledge. When to Trust Experience-Based Knowledge Claims

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Abstract

This paper compares the status and qualities of different forms of expertise and distinguishes them from non-knowledge. It contrasts professional and scientific expertise with a less institutionalised and credentialed but increasingly prominent form: practical, experience-based “lay” or “citizen” expertise. Drawing on social studies of knowledge, expertise, science and the professions, the paper asks when expertise claims are reliable and how the value of experience-based claims can be assessed.

Expertise is conceptualized pragmatically as specialized knowledge that provides orientation to others. While different forms of expertise may be provided by different actors, conveyed through different means and relevant in different contexts, they respond to shared validity standards: authoritative claims must be non-ubiquitous, problem-relevant, and advanced by trustworthy, impartial speakers with specialized capabilities. However, these standards must be translated into context- and knowledge-specific indicators. Assessing experience-based expertise is particularly challenging because conventional markers of epistemic authority are absent. The paper discusses two responses that build on professionalising, processing and certifying lay expertise, thereby partially transforming its character.

Keywords

Expertise, non-knowledge, citizens' experience, epistemic authority, scientific knowledge, professional knowledge

Introduction

This paper compares the status of different kinds of expertise and distinguishes them from non-knowledge. In particular, professional and scientific expertise are compared to a much less institutionalised and credentialed, but seemingly up-and-coming kind of knowledge: experience-based, 'lay' or 'citizen expertise,' i.e. a kind of knowledge whose holders have no formal training on the issue in question, but nonetheless make claims to expertise on the grounds of their personal experiences.

The study starts by asking the following questions that will be further refined during the analysis: Under which conditions do we want to acknowledge others as experts and let them guide our actions? When are claims to expertise reliable, and what indicates the value specifically of lay, experience-based claims to expertise? Do such alternative, experience-based knowledge claims challenge the status of professional knowledge? And what are the boundaries of what can count as knowledge?

Citizen or lay expertise has also been called 'experience-based' or 'experiential knowledge,' 'user knowledge,' 'local expertise,' 'indigenous knowledge' etc., and the terms used vary with context and perspective. All these expressions denote a kind of knowledge that can be placed at the outer pole of the dual distinctions often made between different types of knowledge, procedures of inquiry and grounds of sense-making (see Borkmann, 1976; Collins & Evans, 2002; Corburn, 2002; Eriksen, 2022; Fischer, 2000; Krick, 2022; Meriluoto, 2017; Noorani, 2013, Polanyi, 1966).

I am referring to distinctions between, for instance:

- Theory vs. practice
- Research and evidence vs. practical wisdom and judgement
- Training & analysis vs. (sensual) experience
- Explicit vs. tacit knowledge
- Credentialed (or: codified/certified) vs. non-credentialed (non-codified/non-certified) knowledge
- Propositional knowledge vs. know-how

Regarding all these dichotomies, experience-based expertise leans to the right of the spectrum, while scientific knowledge would be placed on the left.

One can also classify different kinds of knowledge by distinguishing typical knowledge holders. *Lay, experience-based knowledge* can be held by the average 'ordinary' citizens. It is based on first-hand or 'lived' experience, often bodily experience and the use of the senses. It is learned in everyday life, explicitly not in formal training and through systematic analysis. It is often tacit or very difficult to articulate, and it may be more easily conveyed through narratives than through abstract concepts and succinct statements (see e.g. Bartels & Garud, 2003). Good examples are the knowledge of patients, who have in-depth experiences with an illness, its treatment and their bodily reactions, as well as the health system; another is the local knowledge of residents and shop owners in a certain neighbourhood. *Professional or occupational knowledge*, by comparison, is usually based on both practical wisdom and evidence-based tools and acquired by a mix of work experience and formal training. In contrast to lay citizens, professionals need to navigate between and integrate different forms of knowledge. They need to use them all and find mediating virtues such as prudence, forethought and tact (Alvsvåg, 2009), empathy or 'research literacy' (Eriksen, 2022) to reconcile them. Researchers' *scientific knowledge* is sometimes considered a subtype of professional knowledge and sometimes seen as one of the types of knowledge professionals base their practice on. It leans to the left of the poles sketched above, in that it is analytical, theoretical, explicit, and evidence-based knowledge.¹

Thinking about different kinds of knowledge is nothing new. You find it in the early Socratic dialogues, for instance, and there have always been societal movements and epistemological debates that discussed alternative bases of insight, rationality and objectivity. Donna Haraway's (1988) feminist perspective on situated knowledges and Thomasina Borkman's (1976) early reflections on the experiential knowledge of self-help groups are stellar examples of the 1970s and 1980s. However, among the different forms of knowledge, the less credentialed forms have arguably a more contested status and have generally received less attention than scientific and professional knowledge, at least within academic discourse and policy-making contexts. In some societal contexts, the degree of *institutionalisation* of 'alternative,' non-credentialed kinds of expertise seems to be increasing. In Norway, for instance, some distinct organizational changes have been made that ensure a more standard involvement of 'experts-by-experience' into policy-making and service delivery. In the health field, we see this reflected by the Norwegian health directorate's ('Helsedirektoratet') guideline of 'knowledge-based practice,' which is to guide all policy-making on health. Knowledge-based practice is defined as consisting of research-based evidence, health personnel's knowledge (called 'experience-based knowledge' within that context) and 'user knowledge,' which denotes the experience-based expertise and needs of patients and caretakers that have to be

¹ Which kind of knowledge is emphasised in sense-making practices, partly depends on context and in particular the mode of public involvement (Alm Andreassen, 2018; Krick, 2025).

taken into account in all health programs and projects (see also Williams & Glasby, 2010). Another example of institutionalisation is the establishment of an internal 'user involvement center' ('Senter for brukervedvirkning') in the Norwegian health directorate that, in parts, consist of experiential, lay experts and is responsible for implementing user involvement in the everyday work of the directorate. Institutionalisation does typically not occur accidentally, but tends to reflect societal developments. The idea that opportunities for public engagement should be extended has become a widely shared consensus amongst policy-makers as well as citizens today around the globe. It responds to the crisis of representative democracy, the loss of trust in state institutions and tendencies at democratic backsliding. The rationale behind efforts at widening citizen involvement is often just as much about meaningful engagement, responsiveness and civic empowerment as well as the increase of compliance and the use of citizens' (knowledge) resources. In any case, embracing lay perspectives as expertise, thus enhancing their status and involving them in the making of policies dovetails with the 'participatory turn' of contemporary public policy-making (Krick, 2021). In the cited Norwegian case, the involvement of users in health treatment and service delivery is highly institutionalised. It is ensured by law, and the inclusion of this kind of knowledge into the health system's management substantiates patient involvement rights. While the health sector is particularly advanced in that respect in Norway, other societal segments seem to slowly follow that example, thus reconfirming the 'participatory dogma' of contemporary governance (Meriluoto, 2017, p.294) as well as trends of 'evidence-based policy-making.'

When the foundations of public knowledge and expertise are being re-negotiated, and practical, experience-based forms of knowledge seem to be gaining ground, new analyses of the relationship of experts, citizens and the state, as well as the relative status of different kinds of knowledge, are called for. If we acknowledge that the criteria we, as societies, have developed to judge the trustworthiness of experts are tailored towards scientific expertise in particular, an important question becomes: Under which circumstances do we want to trust alternative, experience-based knowledge claims made by lay people? How do we know this is (reliable) expertise? And when do we even want to call it expertise?

Expertise is not the same as knowledge

Expertise is not the same as knowledge, and not all knowledge qualifies as expertise. 'Expert' and 'Expertise' are honorary titles or 'epistemological badges' that radiate epistemic authority (Krick, 2022). Expertise is a certain kind of knowledge, the *specialised knowledge that experts hold*. It allows them to make judgements, give advice and identify courses of action; it enables them to offer authoritative guidance and provide us with orientation in the world (Eyal, 2019, p.24; Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993, p.748; Grundmann, 2017, p.26, 42; Krick, 2021, p.46f.; Jasanoff, 2005, p.3; Nowotny, 2001, p.151). Sociologically speaking, 'expert' is a relational concept that signifies a social status, i.e. the status of being recognised by others as *having reliable (a) and useful (b) knowledge concerning a specific problem* (Eyal, 2019, p.22;

Straßheim, 2008, p.292). Expertise can build on all kinds of sources. It can incorporate scientific, professional, and credentialed knowledge, as well as informal, tacit, alternative and non-credentialed forms. It can relate to practical know-how, as well as to scholastic, propositional knowledge and a mixture of these forms.

Regarding a) the *reliability* of expertise claims, two requirements stand out in expertise studies that build on such a wide, encompassing expertise notion: Reliable (or trustworthy) expertise is indicated by (1) the specialised *capabilities* and *competences* or those deemed experts (Eyal, 2019, p.36; Grundmann, 2017, p.26; Krick, 2018, p.214f.; 2021, p.51; Straßheim, 2008, p.292) and (2) a certain disinterestedness of these agents that supports the objectivity or generalizability of their claims (Haas, 2004, p.576; Krick, 2018, p.215; Krick & Holst, 2019, p.126; Lentsch & Weingart, 2011, p.361; cf. however Grundmann, 2017, p.26, 45). These standards can translate into quite different conditions and indicators, depending on the type of knowledge in focus.

The b) *usefulness* of knowledge and expertise has to do with (1) its *relevance* for a specific problem (its 'issue-relatedness' or 'problem-orientation') and with (2) its *specialisation and originality* (or 'non-ubiquitousness') (Krick, 2022, p.1004; see also Haas, 2004). While the importance of relevance may be self-evident (though sometimes taken for granted for exactly that reason), the specialization criterion might need to be explained with regard to non-scientific expertise: This kind of knowledge is particularly useful when it is precisely *not* 'everyday knowledge' that simply everybody (including policy-makers or scientists) would also have, just by living on earth and being a human being. Mundane, easily acquired knowledge (such as how to book a hotel online) or knowledge irrelevant to others' actions (like what you had for breakfast) would typically not be considered expertise. The experiences of migrant youths living in a deprived neighbourhood, by contrast, can serve as an example of experience-based knowledge that is often desperately sought by planning authorities interested in involving those affected by urban development, yet hard to come by because of the general distance of the elites from these social groups and the particularly low degrees of active participation by these citizens.

Table 1

Pragmatist quality criteria of reliable, useful expertise

Reliability	Usefulness
a) Specialised capabilities and competences of an expert	a) Relevance (or issue-relatedness) of claims
b) Expert disinterestedness (or impartiality)	b) Specialisation & originality (or non-ubiquitousness) of claims

If we do not want to call any claim 'expertise,' we need to ask under which circumstances we want to trust knowledge claims and let them influence our courses of action. In particular: When do we want to trust experience-based, lay expertise claims? How does the quality of lay expertise claims compare to professional and scientific expertise? Can the normative criteria be modelled on more conventional forms of expertise, or do we need a fundamentally different heuristic?

Same standards, different manifestations—juxtaposing scientific and citizens' expertise

To be sure, citizen expertise does not answer to epistemic quality demands in the same way as scientific expertise, which is the most prestigious and widely acknowledged kind of expertise that I will use for contrasting and clarifying purposes in the following.

First, citizen expertise is not based on rigorous, systematic analysis, which is the main scientific method of knowledge production & validation and the essence of academic proficiency. Second, it is not 'neutral,' 'objective' or independent of interests in the same sense as academic expertise. When it comes to lay, experience-based expertise, the line between insights and interests is particularly hard to draw. Of course, scientists are never fully 'neutral,' either. What they focus on may have a very personal grounding, research funding sources are often private, and any discipline's trajectory is, of course, deeply socially entrenched. Yet, one of the main and defining characteristics of experiential experts is that they cannot detach themselves from the things they make statements about because they are personally affected by them.

Citizen expertise is based on firsthand, lived experience and insights that come with being part of a phenomenon (Blume, 2017, 94). Experiential knowledge is "truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others" (Borkman, 1976, p.446; see also Collins/Evans, 2002; Meriluoto, 2017; Noorani, 2013). Experience-based experts *speak on behalf of something that is part of themselves* (their body, their environment, their service use) (Strasser et al., 2019, p.65). It can be argued that lived experience provides the knower with equally rich data and a method for drawing conclusions and making knowledge judgments that is comparably valid as scientific approaches to knowledge production and validation. Experience is the essence of competence of non-credentialed experts. Besides, citizen expertise can be just as specialised and non-ubiquitous as academic expertise. Experience-based claims are therefore, *in theory*, just as precious, sought-after and hard-to-come-by, and thus certainly as useful for others who seek advice. What is more, experience-based expertise is certainly not generally less relevant, maybe sometimes even more relevant than scientific knowledge, because of its applicability and its close link to people's 'real problems.' Finally, individuals who draw on experience do not necessarily advocate their own private interests, but often knowledge gathered through encounters with many (Alm Andreassen et al., 2014).

What needs to be discussed in more depth is the independence criterion of reliable expertise. It is one of the key sources of authority that researchers providing advice draw on; On the strengths of their organisational affiliations with publicly funded research institutions, they tend to be relatively independent in financial and political regard, and can claim to be objective or impartial more easily.

Experience-based, lay experts will not be regarded as independent in the same way. They are, by definition, affected by the issues they know a lot about and potentially provide useful expertise on. On an *individual* level, we should therefore probably not expect detachment and impartiality from non-credentialed, citizen experts. However, it can be argued that the impartiality (or objectivity) of such stakeholder expertise can be approximated on a *collective* level, by way of involving a diversity of experts and balancing their viewpoints. or by ensuring that individuals make their claims based on multiple insights. *Multiperspectivity* and *balance* may not provide the same kind of impartiality that researchers can claim. However, one can indeed argue that a certain disinterestedness and generalizability of claims come with integrating the plurality of affected interests, because it evens out biases. This kind of objectivity has been called 'social objectivity' in epistemological studies (Büter, 2010; see also Longino, 1990).

Proxies and pragmatic indicators of epistemic quality

Yet, even if we agree on the quality criteria discussed above and accept that practical, experience-based expertise is not generally less epistemically valuable than more credentialed and widely acknowledged forms of expertise, it is notoriously difficult to *judge* the epistemic quality of experts' claims *directly*, regardless of the kind of expertise. Expert trustworthiness emanates from expert proficiency and competence, independence and integrity, but this is often very hard to evaluate from the outside. The difficulty of knowing the quality of expertise has concerned thinkers for centuries. One of the difficulties has to do with the 'novice-expert problem' (Goldmann, 2001): Because we typically lack expertise on issues that we seek advice on, a non-expert cannot judge the 'truth degree' of an expert's statements. Besides, it takes a lot of effort to evaluate how independent an individual expert is of conflicts of interest—and it is nearly impossible to assess the rigour of the analytical procedure used to generate knowledge in individual cases.

Instead of conducting in-depth investigations of potential experts giving testimony, or becoming experts ourselves, we therefore use *truth proxies* and *pragmatic indicators of epistemic authority*. Helpful markers are the organisational affiliation and position of a potential expert, his or her track record of work output and the certificates received for professional training. Depending on the profession, the variety and intensity of tasks performed, the teaching and onboarding record, the level of seniority and responsibility achieved, the reputation of the employer and the status of training institutes all indicate a professional's proficiency and probity. In the most advanced professions, formal accreditations are another sign of authority and proficiency.

These track record-based criteria also apply to academia where the output record is about publications and acquired funding, where academic degrees and honours are the key certificates, and affiliation has to be with a research institution. As modern society's number one knowledge production system, the sciences have developed a particularly sophisticated and highly formalised internal quality assurance system that sets it apart from other professions (Jasanoff, 1987; Weingart, 2001): Entry hurdles to academia are very high, competition is fierce, job security is low and especially permanent positions are few and hard to acquire in most countries. Holding a permanent senior academic position (i.e. often bestowed by the title of professor) at one of the higher-ranking research institutions, therefore, sends a signal of exceptional proficiency and authority. Certificates such as the PhD or the 'Habilitation' (that is still the common next step in many university systems) are intellectually demanding, take many years of strain to complete and represent only the minimal requirement for system entry (or continuance in a position). Finally, work output in terms of publications and research grants undergoes strict, formalised and anonymous reviews by peers, and is generally highly competitive—especially before the 'Matthew effect' of receiving one grant on top of the other unfolds. Despite all its flaws and injustices, especially regarding plurality and accountability, the academic quality assurance system potentially ensures a high quality of research, and many within and outside academia use it as a tool to evaluate the trustworthiness of academic experts' claims by proxy.

Shortcuts to assessing the quality of alternative, lay forms of expertise

The problem with experience-based, lay expertise is that such credentials-based indicators cannot simply be copied. This is because of some fundamental differences between professional and scientific knowledge on the one hand and citizens' expertise on the other: First, citizens' expertise is non-certified by nature. Second, and relatedly, there will usually be no track record of work success or past provisions of expertise publicly available to judge from. Third, lay experts will not be employed by a knowledge-producing institution, nor will their jobs usually indicate their domain of experience-based expertise. The state of their knowledge is therefore elusive, slippery, informal, non-credentialed, as well as 'situated' (i.e. context- and perspective-dependent), and its quality is very hard to evaluate for others. Of course, the fact that something is difficult to evaluate does not diminish its quality per se.

The question that warrants more attention against this background is: How can we then judge the epistemic quality of experiential expertise indirectly? What indicates the epistemic credentials of lay experts? Are there shortcuts we can use for orientation, as in the case of professional and scientific knowledge? These questions, of course, become particularly salient if we think of societal and political issues—under which conditions do we accept being guided by such knowledge claims when regulating our public affairs and taking collective decisions?

One idea would be to introduce certificates for lay experts, issued, for instance, upon completion of a training course. Such a certificate would confirm the experience and proficiency of alternative holders of expertise and make it easier to consult or hire such experts. What may at first sound odd or unlikely, impractical or even harmful to the nature and status of this kind of expertise, is in fact already becoming established in some fields where the practice of user involvement is more advanced. In the health sector in many countries, certified experiential experts, or 'peer support workers,' are increasingly involved in the system to support peers, building bridges between patients and health personnel, informing about user perspectives and advising on system changes.² While a completed training course and certificate are not always mandatory to be employed in a position of expert-by-experience, it certainly helps. In Norway, three training programs exist by now in the biggest cities, Trondheim, Bergen and Oslo, with slightly different curricula. In Germany, the 'EX-IN'-program, which goes back to the EU-project 'experienced involvement' (hence EX-IN), offers courses for experts-by-experience all over the country (EX-IN, 2025).³

It is probably no coincidence that attempts at professionalising lay, experience-based forms of knowledge in this way are most advanced in the field of *mental* health. One reason may be that for 'less biological' health problems, other responses and forms of knowledge are needed than what the medical profession can provide. Another reason is that patients with these experiences were not taken seriously, but stigmatised and discriminated against for a long time within the hierarchy of illnesses, which called for affirmative action and an elevation of these kinds of perspectives. Yet, despite the good reasons for professionalising peer support and validating lay knowledge claims by ensuring they transcend individual experiences and incorporate multiple viewpoints, such courses have also been criticised for 'muddying the authenticity' of lay claims and streamlining individual experiences (Meriluoto, 2017; Noohrani, 2013). To be sure, such approaches subject experience-based knowledge to some extent to the standards of professional knowledge, changing the nature of this knowledge on the way. Yet, there is also a lot of merit in professionalising the production and dissemination of experience-based knowledge, because the pooling and processing of individual perspectives adds to the generalizability or 'objectivity' of such claims, thus potentially boosting their validity and reliability.

Another response to the difficulty of judging the reliability of lay claims to expertise directly is to turn to organisations representing certain groups of the affected. Examples would be

² Experts-by-experience in the health sector go under many different names. On top of the already mentioned 'experts-by-experience' and 'peer support worker', common titles are, for instance, 'lived experience practitioner', 'peer-provider', 'peer counsellors', recovery tutors (the German 'Genesungsbegleiter') or 'experience counsellor' (the Norwegian 'Erfaringskonsulenter').

³ The term EX-IN is in this context also used for a person with a psychiatric diagnosis that has completed and EX-IN-course successfully and can be considered a certified expert-by-experience, ready to support and accompany persons with mental health problems.

cancer associations or neighbourhood community groups who can bring in specialised experiences of cancer patients and caretakers, or residents and shop owners in a certain local community, respectively. This may sound risky at first from an epistemological perspective because interest organisations will, by their very nature, be partial, and their expertise biased towards the interests of those they represent. Yet, as argued above, neither are free-floating, individual experts-by-experience disinterested, and even scientists are never neutral (Douglas, 2009); Besides, the neutrality criterion of reliable expertise does not have to be fulfilled by every single expert (representative) individually, but can be approximated by way of the 'social objectivity' that comes with involving and balancing a diversity of different viewpoints. Of course, this also applies to scientific knowledge whose quality rises with the multiplicity of voices and disciplines involved.

What needs to be let go of, however, are romantic ideas of lay, detached, non-organised citizens being more authentic, neutral and trustworthy than organised citizens (see also Barnes, 1999; Martin, 2008). When experience-based expertise is sought from civic organisations, expert trustworthiness is not so much about individual accomplishments, but about an organisation's credentials. These will be much more visible and thus easier to identify and scrutinise, given the need for such organisations to flag their activities publicly. When civic organisations are democratically organised, they will furthermore have established procedures of pooling and processing their members' views. Spokespersons can, on these grounds, make generalizable claims on behalf of their constituency, which adds to the epistemic quality of such claims. To be sure, a spokesperson of such an organisation will not be as epistemically authoritative as a professional or a scientist, whose identity builds very much on their specialised knowledge, and they might not see themselves first and foremost as experts, but as advocates. Nonetheless, many civic organisations actually make knowledge transfer one of their goals, and many use 'information' as an 'access good' to the policy realm (Bouwen, 2002; Gornitzka & Krick, 2018). Some civic organisations stand out in collecting, systematising and transferring knowledge based on user experiences. Intriguing examples are the hybrids of knowledge broker and advocacy group active in the mental health field in Norway that call themselves 'National center for experience-based knowledge,' 'Competence center for lived experience and service development' or 'Norwegian resource center for community mental health.'

Conclusion

The advent of lay expertise in some societal sectors has the potential to stir up the relationship between professionals, experts, citizens and the state. It challenges the classic hierarchy between different forms of knowledge, with science (especially the natural sciences' rigorous methods and numerical evidence) ranking particularly high, while 'user knowledge' ranks lowest, and it blurs the traditional boundary between professionals and citizens in a relationship where the first solves the problems of the latter with the help of professional knowledge (Harrits & Larsen, 2016). Yet, it is important to note that there is actually no clear demarcation

between professionals and experts-by-experience when it comes to their knowledge base: Professional knowledge is a mix of training-, analysis- and research-based knowledge on the one hand and experience-based knowledge on the other hand anyway. Thus, professional knowledge integrates practical and theoretical knowledge quite naturally, and one could even argue that the rise of the experience-based knowledge of lay citizens could enhance the status of the experience-based part of professional knowledge.

One might, of course, wonder whether a widened understanding of expertise (that embraces lay knowledge) waters down societal knowledge standards or undermines conventional forms of expertise. Indeed, we should be careful not to elevate any claim to the status of knowledge, or any knowledge to the status of expertise, because these are honorary titles that need to be earned. This has always been both true and important, but it has become even more crucial in times where universities and academic freedom have come under attack even in some of the longer established democracies, and where populist and authoritarian voices deny truths and facts, support public 'bullshitting' and validate 'gut-feeling' as a reliable source of knowledge on the grounds of anti-intellectualism, elite scepticism and a disdain for science. Besides, in some parts of civil society that fight for better acknowledgement of the lesser heard voices, there is a certain danger of romanticising the experience-based, often narratively conveyed knowledge claims of 'alternative,' 'indigenous' and 'local' communities, depicting them, more or less explicitly, as somehow superior, purer and more authentic. While the intention here is unlikely to be a devaluation of science, uncritically embracing any claim—including claims of preference and opinion—as knowledge claims can undermine public sense-making severely. Given the ideological risk of elevating narrative accounts to incontestable truths—and thereby shielding them from critique—we should be cautious not to idealise narrative knowledge more than other forms. "Far from being an unqualified source of knowledge, experience must be treated with the same kind of scepticism and suspicion with which we approach all other sources of authoritative knowledge" (Gabriel, 2004, p.183). It is important to note that this may present a challenge, especially when confronted with tales of suffering and victimisation that have the "to inoculate themselves against criticism, precisely by emerging as the voice of authentic experience, an experience that cannot be denied, without violating the integrity of the narrator" (Gabriel, 2004, p.173). An important response to these challenges is to subject experience-based types of knowledge to the same quality standards as any other kind of knowledge, while allowing for different paths to fulfilling them.

This study argued that claims to expertise need to be relevant and non-ubiquitous, as well as provided by specialised and impartial experts to qualify as useful and reliable—irrespective of the kind of knowledge, the type of speaker and the knowledge production process. Applying these generalised epistemic quality criteria is, however, a much bigger challenge when it comes to practical experience-based knowledge that is usually non-formalised and uncredentialed, leaving us without the usual proxies and shortcuts we use for evaluating the reliability of expertise claims. The responses to this challenge that this study discusses both follow the

path of professionalising lay knowledge practices in different ways, thereby changing the nature of this knowledge to some extent. Whether we take to professional stakeholders as providers of processed, experience-based expertise or certify this kind of knowledge through formalised training, both approaches likely add to the status of experience-based claims. Still, they may come at the price of mainstreaming individual experiences and excluding some viewpoints.

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