

1 An Introduction and Overview

1.1 Introduction

As Andrew Abbott famously stated, professions ‘heal our bodies, measure our profits and save our souls’ (1988: 1). This quote neatly captures the influence and pervasiveness of professions and professionals in our world. In Europe, the roots of many modern-day professions can be traced back to the nineteenth century or earlier, especially with regard to the archetypal cases of medicine, law, academia and the clergy. These professions bore many of the hallmarks of medieval craft guilds, which focused narrowly on protecting the monopolies of skilled trades (Krause, 1996), but also *Gesellschaft* forms of association, emphasizing scientific inquiry and a universalistic orientation (Adler et al., 2008). From these foundations, a more significant expansion of professions took place in the twentieth century as knowledge became more specialized and demand for expertise grew in a wider range of fields. This process led to the emergence of new occupations (e.g. scientists, engineers, teachers, project managers and many more) claiming professional recognition and status, a trend that continues to this day. In the USA, for example, the steady expansion of the professional and technical occupations has resulted in this category becoming the largest occupational group, employing 30 million people and representing 21 per cent of the workforce in 2016, compared to 12 per cent in 1965 (BLS, 2016; 1965).

These trends highlight the continued growth of a professional workforce with distinctive characteristics (Leicht & Fennell, 2001). The number, size and sophistication of organizations that directly employ or play host to professionals or claim to represent them (membership associations) has also grown exponentially. These organizations include professional bureaucracies such as hospitals, schools and universities that remain central to the operation of the welfare state and delivery of public services to large populations (Ackroyd et al., 2007). Equally significant are professional services firms (PSFs), which are amongst the largest, most complex and most globally diversified organizations in the contemporary economy (Empson et al., 2015).

There can be little doubt, then, that professionals and their organizations matter. Yet, in recent years, a growing number of scholars have raised questions about the ubiquity and authority of the professions, with some predicting their demise (Reed, 2007; Leicht, 2016). There are several strands to this debate. Some draw attention to deskilling and de-professionalization risks due to the enhanced possibilities of information technology and managerialism (Arronowitz & DiFazio, 1995; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). It is sometimes argued that professionals are facing their own industrial revolution as mass

production methods replace craft-based production. Others emphasize ways in which neo-liberal government agendas have unsettled traditional regulatory arrangements and, by infusing distinctively commercial and managerial logics, are reshaping the professions (Brock et al., 1999).

The complexity of problems confronting society and changes in consumer demand for professional services represent a further set of challenges (Noordegraaf, 2011). Traditionally, highly specialized professional knowledge has focused on individual case treatment: curing patients, teaching pupils and balancing the books. However, it is argued that the ‘wicked’ nature of many contemporary social problems, such as those relating to climate change or population ageing, now requires a pooling of expertise and greater collaboration. In areas such as health, this threatens to undermine existing professional jurisdictions and the established status hierarchy to provide services that are both interdisciplinary and co-produced with users (Ferlie et al., 2011; Adler & Kwon, 2013).

Lastly, observers have focused on the legitimacy crisis facing professionals, amplified by several high-profile instances of professional malpractice (Reed, 1996; Muzio et al., 2016; Gabbioneta et al., 2018; Dixon-Woods et al., 2011). This ‘dark side’ of the professions is apparent in areas such as healthcare, symbolized by the Shipman affair in the UK National Health Service (NHS) and the Kennedy Inquiry into unwarranted child mortality at Bristol Royal Infirmary (Saks, 2015). A number of high-profile corporate scandals such as Enron and Parmalat (Gabbioneta et al., 2013; 2014) have also shaken public confidence. These could only occur with the acquiescence, if not complicity, of the very professional advisors who, in theory, should have prevented such misbehaviour. Indeed, in the words of Mitchell and Sikka (2011: 8): ‘scratch the surface of any financial scandal or a tax dodge and the invisible hand of major accountancy firms is highly evident’.

Hence, questions arise as to how far the established mode of professional self-regulation and organization can be maintained in light of these challenges. On the one hand, it seems that many professional occupations are on a journey towards de-professionalization. However, as will be discussed, the resilient and adaptable nature of the professions should not be underestimated. In this regard, the future may witness not so much a decline but a ‘reconfiguration’ of the professions and professional (or community) forms of organizing (Adler et al., 2008).

In this Element, we engage with these fundamental questions concerning the future trajectory of the professions, their organizations and members. However, prior to doing so, it is important to clarify some key terms of reference and boundary conditions that will shape our analysis (also see Table 1 for a summary of key terms). First is to distinguish between ‘professionalism’ as an analytical,

social category and one employed as a rhetorical resource (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). It is clear that the words ‘profession’ and ‘professionalism’ can also have wider significance. This partly arises from a semantic confusion surrounding their usage in the English language. Sometimes the word ‘profession’ is used as a polite synonym for work, job or occupation (for example, ‘what is your job or profession?’). This discursive dimension of professionalism has become more important in recent years. Claims to be ‘professional’ may originate ‘from below’ by individuals, occupations and organizations to signal their quality and status but can also be deployed ‘from above’ by managers and employers to elicit commitment, maintain control and justify processes of occupational or organizational change (Fournier, 1999; Evetts, 2014). However, our primary focus in this Element will be on professionalism as a ‘social category’, a distinct mode of labour market organization whereby members of an occupation (rather than consumers or employers) retain control over the definition, performance and evaluation of their work (Freidson 2001; Brint, 1994).

A second key assumption that will guide our analysis concerns the relationship between ‘occupations’ and ‘professions’. At its simplest, an ‘occupation’ signifies a community of practitioners with similar skill requirements engaging in common work tasks that are relatively enduring, either within a sector or spanning several sectors (Anteby et al., 2016). While administrative categories – such as the standard occupational classification system (or SOC) – represent a useful starting point, the way occupations are defined and labelled is socially constructed and fluid (Bechky, 2003). In some cases, this leads to the institutionalization of ‘occupational communities’ (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) that ‘shape our individual identities, tastes, and affiliations’ (Bechky, 2011: 1158). By contrast, a profession is a more specific category. According to Ritzer and Walczak (1986: 44), a profession is ‘an occupation that has had the power to have undergone a development process enabling it to acquire or convince significant others’ and ‘has acquired a constellation of characteristics we have come to accept as denoting a profession’.

A third area where it is important to define terms of reference is with regard to the notion of professional organizations (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). Although this term is frequently used in the literature, its precise meaning is not always clear. This is partly due to a historical divide between the ‘sociology of professions and occupations’ and ‘sociology of organizations’ (Lounsbury & Kaghan, 2001). While the former draws attention to professionalism as a distinctive way of organizing in the labour market (as already mentioned), the latter is concerned with the organizations that represent, employ or play host to professionals. Nevertheless, even within the specific ‘sociology of organizations’

there is often some confusion. According to Scott (1965: 65), ‘professional organizations’ are those in which ‘members of one or more professional groups play the central role in the achievement of the primary organizational objectives’. However, within this broad category, further distinctions are necessary. The first is between organizations that directly employ or play host to practising professionals and ‘membership-based organizations’ (Hudson et al., 2013) which represent them. A second distinction is within the category of organizations that employ or play host to professionals, between so-called *autonomous* and *heteronomous* organizations. The former consists of organizations where professionals *own or control core assets* (Empson et al., 2015), such as in the case of law, accounting and management consulting firms (Powell et al., 1999). By contrast, the latter refer to situations where professionals are employed (or contracted) within a wider bureaucratic structure and are subject to external control but lack any distinct organizational identity. Typical examples include public service agencies (schools, universities, hospitals), although this category might also encompass professional departments (such as human resources or finance) within large multi-divisional corporations.

A final set of assumptions made in this Element concern the cultural and historical specificity of notions of professionalism (Sciulli, 2005). As we shall see, much of the literature depicts professions as collective agents, operating relatively autonomously in civil society in pursuit of distinctive strategies or goals. However, this perspective has deep roots in the Anglo-American historical context, emphasizing ‘the freedom of self-employed practitioners to control work conditions’ (Collins, 1990: 98). By contrast, in France, where the state ‘restricted the autonomy of the institutions of civil society’, professional development followed a different path (MacDonald 1995: 97). Here, according to MacDonald: ‘knowledge-based services have remained in the ambit of the state, restricting the success of the professional project’ (MacDonald 1995: 97). Similarly, McClelland (1991) distinguishes between a ‘professionalization from above’ and a ‘professionalization from below’ pattern. The former is especially relevant to state socialist or post-communist societies, including China, where even high-status expert groups such as doctors remain effectively state functionaries. Therefore, while the notion of professions and professionalization has (arguably increasing) global relevance, one must also acknowledge certain cultural and historical biases, which underpin much of the literature on this topic.

1.2 Structure of the Element

In what follows, we build on the aforementioned distinctions to address some of the central questions concerning the nature and future trajectory of professions

as a distinct occupational category and of professional *organizations*. To accomplish our goals, the Element unfolds over six additional chapters. In Sections 2 and 3, we focus on the theoretical underpinnings of research on the professions and contemporary challenges. Section 2 reviews key approaches to the study of professional occupations and organizations through three distinct lenses: function, power and institution. These lenses present substantially different understandings of professionalism, which have unfolded chronologically. Section 3 then assesses three challenges facing contemporary professions: cultural delegitimization, the disruptive potential of new technologies and changing regulation.

Building on these debates, we explore contemporary developments in the worlds of professions applying three units of analysis: *macro*, *meso* and *micro*. Starting at the macro level, Section 4 focuses on the increasing role of professions and their associations in regulating occupations and labour markets. Section 5 (meso) turns to the rise in the size, influence and sophistication of professional organizations in both public and private sectors. Lastly, Section 6 considers how the lived experience of work is changing, raising questions about professional autonomy and identity. We note that, whilst the effects of macroeconomic and societal forces have, undoubtedly, altered the lived experience of professional work, professionals have proven to be highly adept at developing strategies to respond to emergent challenges and exploiting the opportunities presented by them (Evetts, 2011). In each chapter, we provide an overview of substantive debates drawing on a wide range of secondary sources. We conclude by discussing various scenarios regarding the future of the professional occupations and organizations and suggesting some directions for additional research.

1.3 A Summary of Key Terms

This section has introduced several core terms relating to professions and professional organizations that are integral to the discussion in the rest of the Element. For quick reference, definitions are summarized in Table 1.

2 Three Lenses for Studying Professional Occupations and Organizations

2.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the theoretical literature on professions. Key concepts and debates within the sociology of professions and organization theory are reviewed and classified, using *three* distinct lenses: function, power and institutions. Broadly, these lenses follow the historical evolution of theory

Table 1 A Summary of Key Terms

Term	Definition	More detail ...
Occupation	An occupation refers to a community of practitioners with similar skill requirements engaging in common work tasks that are relatively enduring, either within a sector or spanning several sectors.	
Profession	An occupation that has undergone several stages of development and successfully effected tactics and strategies that convinced others (especially the state and public) to accord it the status of a ‘profession’ with resultant material and social benefits.	Throughout, but see Section 2 for debate on definition.
Professionalism	An analytical category denoting a distinct mode of labour market organization whereby members of an occupation (rather than consumers or employers) retain a high degree of control over the definition, performance and evaluation of their work.	Throughout, but see Section 2, 4 and 6 for challenges and adaptations.
Professionalization	The process that leads to professionalism. Sometimes this is referred to as a ‘professional project’ aimed at negotiating labour market shelters and upward social mobility.	As above, but especially Section 4.
Membership-based organizations.	Formal organizations (such as professional associations) whose remit centres on advancing the interests of its members collectively with a view to (but not always) acquiring or maintaining the status of a ‘profession’ and access to market and cultural benefits.	See Section 4.

Table 1 (cont.)

Term	Definition	More detail ...
Autonomous organizations	Organizations where professionals own or control core assets, resulting in a unique governance style and high practitioner autonomy. Professional Services Firms are an archetypal example.	See Section 5
Professional service firms	Private sector organizations which are characterized by: knowledge intensity, low capital intensity and a professionalized workforce (Von Nordenflycht, 2010).	See Section 5
Professional workers	A distinct category of workers (employed or self-employed) whose work entails the application of theoretical and scientific knowledge to individual cases. The terms and conditions of work traditionally command considerable autonomy from external oversight, except by peer representatives.	See Section 5

and research on the professions, which originated in the 1930s (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011; Muzio et al., 2013). Each lens includes several perspectives, often with different theoretical foundations, but all share a distinct understanding of professionalism as an occupational ideology and work organization method. See Table 2 for an overview.

Unsurprisingly, specific issues may look very different according to which lens one adopts. Thus, from a functionalist lens, the ‘up or out’ promotion system typical of large accountancy and law firms (see Section 6) is justified by the need to promote the most skilled and dedicated staff. By contrast, a ‘power’ lens views it as a device to further the interests of professional elites by encouraging processes of work intensification (Ackroyd & Muzio, 2007). As such, the three lenses are analytically distinct, rooted in different theoretical perspectives, research traditions and, in some cases, incompatible understandings of professions and their role in society.

In what follows, we first explore what the three lenses imply for broader understandings of the professions. Later, we examine how they have been

Table 2 Three Lenses for Studying Professions

	Functional	Power	Institution
Sociological Theory	Functionalist sociology	Weberian and Marxist sociology, including social closure theory, labour process theory and Foucauldian-inspired perspectives	Institutional theory
Primary Focus	Function of professions as (largely) altruistic sources of social solidarity and cohesion	Professions as self-interested agents engaged in ‘professionalization projects’ Professions as agents and subjects of control	Role of professions as cultural producers in shaping organizational fields and societal institutions
Understanding of Professions	Distinctive traits of professional occupations	Professionalization as a process	Professions as institutions
Key Exemplars	Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933); Goode (1957); Wilensky (1964)	Abbott (1988); Freidson (1988; 1994); Johnson (1972); Larson (1977)	Scott (2008); Thornton et al. (2012); Muzio et al. (2013)

applied to theories of professional organizations whilst noting that the literature in this area is still evolving.

2.2 Functionalist Lens

Functionalist accounts of professionalism begin with Emile Durkheim, who, like others after him, was preoccupied with the issue of social cohesion. Arguing that capitalism generates moral anarchy and would self-destruct unless it is contained within a society defined by mutual interest (1992: 23–5), Durkheim singles out the ‘professional grouping’ as ‘a moral force capable of

curbing individual egoism' (1984: xxxix). He explains that self-regulating occupational communities foster a sense of solidarity and moral responsibility by socializing members to focus not on their own self-interest but on that of the whole community (Durkheim, 1992). Others, such as Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933), identify professionalism as a force for stability and freedom against the apparent threat of industrial and governmental bureaucracies.

Hence, the functionalist lens emphasizes the altruistic motives of professions and the intrinsic value of their expertise to public welfare. According to T. H. Marshall, professionalism 'is not concerned with self-interest, but with the welfare of the client' (1939: 331–2), such that the professional 'does not work in order to be paid: he is paid in order that he may work' (325). More recently, this has been associated with what Schneyer (2013) terms the 'business/profession dichotomy'. While business people are motivated only by profit, professionals, it is argued, are driven by altruism and notions of public trusteeship. Indeed, it is often claimed that professional values are still a critically important bulwark against the worst abuses of the free market. Anteby (2010), for example, shows how even trades that are morally questionable – such as dealing in human cadavers in the USA – may acquire legitimacy when sanctioned by professionals.

From this perspective, the common traits of professions, such as labour market monopoly and self-regulation, are necessary and in the public interest (Parsons, 1954). For instance, barriers to entry (monopoly) may be in the public interest by guaranteeing high standards of education and training of licensed practitioners (Halliday, 1987). In this way, the unqualified and incompetent are excluded, the safety of the public assured, and the quality of services enhanced. A similar argument is made about ethical codes and rules that have sought to insulate practitioners from competition (Merton, 1982).

2.2.1 'Traits-Based' Models of the Professions

'Traits-based' models of the professions, which grew in influence in the 1950s, constitute another characteristic of the functionalist approach. These models sought to identify the unique attributes of 'professional' occupations in order to make explicit what sets them apart from other expert and non-expert workers (Muzio et al., 2013). Goode (1957) for instance, identified eight characterizing features of profession, which included, amongst others, a lifelong calling, common identity and compliance with an ethical code. In a systematic review of this literature, Hickson and Thomas (1969) identified twenty different models, including fourteen mutually exclusive traits.

Other scholars have built on this approach to explore professions at different stages of development, for example Etzioni's (1969) classic distinction between

professions and so-called semi professions. Traits models also became associated with the idea of an ideal-typical life cycle – involving key stages of development whereby certain occupations develop over time. Wilensky (1964) famously noted seven stages that (historically) characterized the formation of both established and newer professional occupations. These stages included: becoming a full-time occupation; opening a training school and then a university course; establishing a formal association (regionally and nationally); achieving state recognition through licensing; and signing up to a formal code of ethics.

Traits models have been highly influential in defining the boundary conditions of ‘professions’ (Leblebici & Sherer, 2015). However, by the late 1960s, functionalist accounts were beginning to lose their appeal. Traits-based scholarship came to be seen as a misguided focus of sociological enquiry, not least because it was largely ahistorical and failed to explain the power of particular occupational groups (Evetts, 2014). It transpired that many lists (of traits) were based on an idealized view, drawn from the exemplar professions of the nineteenth century: law and medicine. Critics also argued that the taxonomic approach was oriented more towards legitimizing professional ideologies as opposed to depicting them in practice (Saks, 2016).

2.3 Power Lens

From the mid-1960s, attention shifted from studying professions as occupations with shared traits to professionalization as a *process* (Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). This involved reframing the sociology of the professions away from the old question ‘what is a profession’ towards a concern with how occupations accomplish and maintain professional status. As Everett C. Hughes (1963) famously stated: ‘in my studies I passed from the false question “Is this occupation a profession’ to the more fundamental one “what are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people?”’ Accordingly, the focus moved towards trying to understand how occupations accomplished professionalism as a strategic and purposeful endeavour (Becker, 1970) and away from producing checklists of the definitive traits deemed to constitute a ‘profession’.

This shift in thinking reinforced the centrality of power for understanding professions. Specifically, it meant focusing on professionalization as a process whereby an occupation gains control over a work jurisdiction. Hence, Johnson (1972) noted how, in theory, any occupation might seek to mobilize knowledge to gain monopoly control over expert work and the power that this affords. From this perspective, professionalism is defined as ‘a peculiar type of occupational