

Reframing professionalism as a multi-layered concept in the context of public administration reform

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Abstract

Against the background of major public administration reforms, there has been a surge in public administration research to understand the evolving intra-organisational relationships between managers and professionals. Unfortunately, the way in which such research is usually conceptualised is becoming an obstacle to its theoretical and empirical progress. Most of the research tends to adopt an operational perspective in search for solutions and to detect fruitful coping mechanisms within public service organizations. Managers and professionals are framed as competing parties in an oppositional relationship. As a result, fundamental questions of professionalism and the provision of public services in the 21st century remain underexposed. In this paper, we argue that the relationship between managers and professionals in public services reflects wider social phenomena, which are often rooted in major social transformations. Solutions to solve the presented problems and issues are not to be expected from research that only embraces an operational perspective.

We will adopt a historical-sociological perspective to reflect on professionalism and its relation to public governance. This allows us to reconsider the basic concepts with regard to professionalism and the role of professionals as providers of public services. Moreover, a more fundamental analysis of the context and social transformations in which current issues about professionals and managers originate will show that solutions for perceived problems will not come from coping mechanisms at the individual level, but from a broader dialogue on professionalism and its added value in the context of providing public services. By considering professionalism as a multi-layered concept, we have the opportunity to take broader social developments into account as well as the interactions of the various levels (individual, community and society). In doing so, we attempt to further develop public

administration theories with regard to managers and professionals, as well as their role in public administration reform.

1. Introduction

There has been a surge in public administration research aiming to understand the evolving intra-organisational relationships between managers and professionals. Thanks to this research, we now have a deeper understanding and more balanced picture of the position and roles of professionals and managers within public sector organisations. Unfortunately, the way in which such research is usually conceptualised is becoming an obstacle to its theoretical and empirical progress. Much of the research tends to adopt a perspective in which managers and professionals are framed as competing parties in an oppositional relationship, and in which professionalism is romanticised.

Perceptions of professionals in the public debate have varied strongly over time. Interpretations of professionalism in terms of power and privilege inspired a wide denouncement of professionals during the 1970s. Among the best-known criticisms is Illich's assertion that professionalism is simply a cover for attempts to monopolise and commodify knowledge, robbing citizens of the power to actively solve their own problems (Illich, 1977). Not only do professional methods encourage dependency among clients, but professionals also have an interest in keeping their clients in a state of dependency.

Such criticism helped to trigger public management reforms that tried to bring professionals under stricter control. When this 'New Public Management' was first launched, it was regarded as a liberating philosophy that would hold public organisations accountable and offer citizens from bias and incompetence. However, how these public management reforms affect professionals is rather ambiguous (Trommel, 2006). On the one hand, it has underlined the need for decentralised decision-making and autonomy, which can be seen as favouring professionals. On the other hand, and this is the interpretation stressed in much of the literature on professionalism, NPM also emphasizes output control and performance measurement, which potentially diminish professional autonomy when output is defined and measured in detail. This includes performance measurement and stricter control over the type of activities that professionals should concentrate on.

And here, in public administration research, the ball goes in the reverse direction, again. In reaction to portraying professionals as undervalued and misunderstood workers that suffer from NPM, professionals are currently characterized as to their work devoted workers, taking pride in their work. One can find such descriptions in articles, books and on the internet (e.g. Jansen, Van den Brink & Kole, 2009; Tonkens, 2008). Taking pride in one's work, even being devoted to it, is considered essential to guaranteeing the quality of 'professional' work (e.g. Sennett, 2008; Niessen & Karssing, 2008). This idea fits in a tradition of organizational psychological studies focusing on work satisfaction, motivation and commitment to organizational success (e.g. Matthieu & Zajac, 1990; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002;) and in books like *The economy of esteem* (Brennan & Pettit, 2004). Based on the positive effects that professional pride has on performances and work satisfaction, Jansen, Van den Brink & Kole (2009), define professional pride as an 'unsuspected force'. Focusing on professional pride and devotion as features of professionals seems meant to create a particular aura around professionals. Stressing the unique identity of professional work (implicitly and sometimes explicitly), it leads to demands to safeguard the autonomy of professionals (see e.g. website professional pride). Jansen, Van den Brink & Kole (2009) argue that it is important to support the growing sense of professional pride among professionals such as teachers and policemen.

There is of course necessarily a distinction between the academic and the (necessarily different) public debate, but in public administration research, both seem to have been caught in the same unfortunate conceptual dead-end, which is to examine the changing role of the professional as an intra-organisational context, driven on by a government blind to the merits of true professionalism.

Not only is this romantic picture of professionalism slightly nauseating¹, it also constitutes a rather superficial reflection of a complex and refined academic debate, reducing the changing position of the professional to a simple duel between the professional and his superiors over issues of control. This discussion, as we will argue, leaves fundamental questions considering professionalism and the provision of public services underexposed. Professionalism is a multi-layered concept and a singular focus on any one layer blunts the analysis. As a result of

¹ To be conceptually precise, we refer to nausea not primarily in the sense of physical revulsion (though this is not necessarily excluded) but in the emotional sense, e.g. as the sensation of watching certain types of romantic comedies.

its limited focus, the discussion also tends to confuse several issues that are not all necessarily connected to professionalism, such as those related to any type of service occupation.

This paper analyses and explains the concepts of professionalism in the context of public governance by adopting a historical-sociological perspective. On this basis, we argue that the changing position of the professional in public service provision inevitably reflects wider social phenomena, which are rooted in major social transformations. Consequently, solutions to solve the presented problems and issues are not to be expected from research that only focuses on issues of managerial control and its excesses. To get ahead, the issue must be fundamentally reframed. We will reconsider the basic concepts with regard to professionalism and the role of professionals in the provision of public services. Moreover, a more fundamental analysis of the context and social transformations in which current issues about professionals and managers originate will show that solutions for perceived problems will not come simply from the identification of coping mechanisms at the individual level, but from a broader dialogue on professionalism and its added value in the context of services.

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2. Theoretical framework

The nature of professionalism

It is by now common to state that it is difficult to draw a definitional line between professional professions and other occupations, following Wilensky's (1964) famous assertion that everyone is becoming a professional. The definitional issue has since become less salient and scholars have come to accept that it is not impossible to distinguish professionals and non-professionals strictly. (Evetts, 2006). While we wholeheartedly agree that definitional precision is not a top priority, it is nevertheless useful to briefly return to the definition, since it is a useful starting-point for discussing key issues associated with the concept.

Earlier work on professionalism shows that the concept professionalism has always been interpreted in mutual and sometimes even contradictory ways (see Evetts, 2003). Different notions emphasize different elements of professionalism. Some focus on the idealistic aspects

of professionals, others state that the nature of the work (work logic) demands professionalism. While others state that professionalism is just the outcome of conflict and reflects an attempt of a certain group to protect themselves. These three notions reflect different perspectives of professionalism; a normative, cultural cognitive and regulative perspective. But although definitions of the professional (see, e.g., Burrage et al. 1990; Freidson 2001) vary, they do tend to incorporate the following components:

- A professional has specific knowledge and expertise, based on the application of systematic theoretical principles.
- The professional belongs to a closed community of people with similar knowledge and expertise. This community is characterized by shared norms and values, institutions for socialization, and regulation.
- The closed nature of the community is considered legitimate by the wider society within which it operates.
- Both at the individual level and at the level of their community, professionals are allowed a broad measure of discretionary autonomy to manage their own affairs.

As one can see, this type of definition contains three broad elements, each of which operates at a different level of analysis:

1. The first focuses on characteristics of resources of the professional at the individual level. He or she knows better how to cut into flesh or teach grammar than other people do.
2. The second element locates the professional within communities, which cut across the organisations where professionals are active. These people learn their professional ways at the level of structured social communities or networks.
3. A third important element is that these professionals are recognised as superior to ordinary folk in whatever they do. This can be located, roughly, at the level of the 'general public' or 'society'.

This multi-layered nature makes professionalism an interesting, but highly complex concept. It is all the more so because in several ways, the traditional professional appears to be under threat. These threats are located at the intersection of levels, respectively between individual and community, and between community and society. Yet no comprehensive analysis of the

development of professionalism can be complete without a discussion of the interaction of all levels. The problem of much public administration research is that it focuses primarily on the individual level, sometimes discusses professional communities, but rarely takes into account broader social developments. It is worth noticing that many of these analyses depend upon a 'diavolo ex machina'. Even in the theatre, the credibility of such a device has been debated.

Organisational tensions and professionalism

At the individual level, in the context of public service delivery, the professional worker is working in an ever more structured environment. As noted before, it is this individual level that public administration research tends to focus on, given the various studies of how New Public Management reforms have threatened the traditional professional. In Mintzberg's terms, public management reforms have tended towards the standardisation of process, as opposed to the standardisation of skills associated with professionalism. This distinction, when re-framed in sociological terms, means that the individual is subservient to two different types of communities: the organisational and the professional one, each with different sets of controls. We are observing the shift of the dominance of one type of community to another.

Wilensky (1964) considered the organisational context as a barrier to professionalisation, weakening both the service ideal and professional autonomy, since organisations develop their own controls and hierarchies in which the salaried professional must accept the ultimate authority of non-professionals in the assessment of both process and product. This is exactly what appears to be the case with public management reforms: they have tightened organisational controls.

A review of the research on professionals' perceptions of organisational control illustrates a weaker autonomy at working floors and more and more cost- and client-based managerialism within organizations such as schools and hospitals. Generally speaking, professionals who were used to a collegial authority, and trust by clients and employers, now have to cope increasingly with hierarchical structures of authority. And here it is relevant to realize that the executives and managers and policy makers who restructure and weaken professional control in service delivery are themselves trying to become professionals (Noordegraaf, 2007). Professionals also argue that the increased control has affected their work and have affected the prioritizing of work activities. It is far from illogical that the achievements and tasks that are less-measurable are shove aside in favour of the measurable tasks and duties. In line with

this idea professionals argue that nowadays they devote less time to their 'real' tasks (helping clients, seeing patients and teaching pupils) since they have to fill in all kinds of forms (e.g. Van Veen, 2005; De Bruijn, 2005). Moreover, professionals have to deal with consumerist tendencies. Consequently professional work is nowadays more often defined as a service product that is to be marketed, price tagged and individually evaluated and numerated. Svensson and Evetts, (2003) note that public services are in that sense, commodified.

“Often such occupational changes are interpreted by workers as increased bureaucratization (i.e. more form-filling) but, as a consequence, the quality of the service to the client is perceived by the workers to decline. One result is a form of occupational identity crisis that can be expressed as forms of discontent perceived particularly by (older? and) more experienced groups of workers” (Evetts, 2006, p. 139).

But, accepting that such an identity crisis is perceived, to what extent is it about professionalism? This argument hinges on the assumption that the preferred operating methods of workers are replaced by those preferred by others, but this is not in itself typical of professionals. To some extent, all work within organisations is standardized. A worker may prefer to sleep during office hours, but regulations usually prevent this. We accept this as fair. We also accept that certain trade-offs need to be made in work situations that make the organisation more economically sustainable at the expense of quality. The shop assistant at the department store could be far more helpful to customers, if only he or she could devote more time to them individually. Shops may vary the trade-offs: some will pay special attention to individual customer, others will emphasize low prices and treat customers like cattle. In public services, similar trade-offs exist.

These choices have become more difficult in recent decades. Competitive pressure and a squeeze in resources have generally made it more difficult for public service providers to balance different values such as equity, efficiency and quality. This friction between values is, by extension, likely to increase the friction between groups with different positions within the organisation. As clients demand better quality and managers cope with shrinking budgets, the potential for conflict grows, since people in different positions will tend to favour a different balance of values. The teacher will set different priorities than the headmaster; the headmaster different priorities than the porter. The organisational culture of an organisation and its civic

quality are essential in preventing such natural differences of perspective from turning into conflicts (Brandsen, 2009).

There is the risk of confusing issues of professionalism with general issues of service provision. To demonstrate this, consider Lipsky's classic analysis of street-level bureaucrats (would they be called street-level professionals today?). In this inspiring book, he shows how workers face pressure from various directions, both from clients and managers (Lipsky, 1980). They invent methods to deal with these pressures, sometimes these are generally accepted methods (e.g. keeping spare capacity to deal with special cases, sometimes they are an outright violation of anything we can define as civic (e.g. deliberately humiliating clients). This is to regain control, or, to be more precise, it is about reversing a lack of control. Otherwise the dispositions of the street-level bureaucrats –what they positively want- remain rather obscure. Clients are only observed in terms of their outward behaviour, as in how they put bureaucrats under pressure. Managers are faceless and only described in terms of demands, push and pull. Notwithstanding the high appeal and merits of Lipsky's analysis, it leaves no room for any solution except that street-level bureaucrats are relieved from outside pressure – and one of his starting assumptions is that such pressure is inevitable.

At its worst, this leads to a conceptualisation of organisations as pineapples: a primary process surrounded by an unwholesome bureaucratic peel. From such a perspective, managerial layers are at best a necessary evil. Such a conceptualisation not only disregards the need for managers and the values that they represent, but also leads the discussion on professionalism into a conceptual dead end. Many of the same problems that befall street-level bureaucrats in Lipsky's analysis affect professionals too, but professionalism is in itself a distinct phenomenon. One must make a clear analytical distinction between trade-offs within a work situation, which to some extent affect all workers in service positions, and the specific issues that affect professionals and the professional communities of which they are part. The latter can only be understood by linking this organisational discussion to broader social developments, which we will discuss next.

3. Reflection: modernization continued?

The meaning of professional communities within society has been a dominant theme in the sociology of professions. From a Weberian perspective, the issue is how occupational groups

take up and maintain positions of power in relation to other members of society. This type of perspective informed the criticism of professionals of some decades ago. Other, more functionalist perspectives emphasize the function of professionalism in shielding complex, knowledge-based occupations from other types of coordination in society, particularly the market and hierarchy (cf. Freidson, 2001). A Foucault-inspired perspective would regard professionalism as a discourse that controls work practices. While these perspectives are not completely reconcilable at a fundamental conceptual level, all of them interpret the changing position of professionals in terms of the modernization process and it is this link that is crucial to our argument.

In a society characterized by increasing specialization, sociologists began to discern specific groups of occupations that achieved sufficient social status to secure a high degree of self-regulation for themselves. The medical profession is the typical example: its members have specialized knowledge that most people lack; they share certain cultural codes, symbolized by swearing the Hippocratic Oath; limited entry to their community is maintained by medical schools with restricted access; individual members have the freedom to make highly personalized judgements in their daily practices; traditionally their community regulates its own affairs, including failures of judgement; and, the rest of society has generally accepted this state of affairs. However, the legitimacy of traditional professions has over time diminished. This loss of status can be deduced simply from the status hierarchies as they emerge from surveys: the doctors, professors and judges have all taken a dive in the polls. Several developments appear to contribute to this development.

First of all, there is a broader development towards a society in which traditional status groups no longer have the legitimacy to uphold their privileged status, or at least not so easily. In institutional terms, they have come to rely more on formal, regulative institutional rules as the self-evident normative rules have become less effective. This is of course connected to the fact that expert knowledge is no longer confined to a select handful of occupations. Whereas membership of the medical profession was once strongly related to socio-economic status, it is now less so, given the armies of young people who attend medical school (though we hasten to add that a socio-economic bias continues to exist). But even occupations that are still scarce (e.g. Cabinet jobs, the papacy) have suffered from a loss of legitimacy. In Weber's terms, traditional authority is declining everywhere. This is not a new phenomenon: the

professions themselves partially replaced older traditional status positions, such as the nobility.

There has been a proliferation of professions, or, depending on perspective, of occupations claiming to have a professional status. This is what Wilensky has famously called “the professionalization of everyone” (Wilensky 1964). Occupations that were previously regarded as insufficiently skilled or organised have started to ‘professionalize’, at least in name. What was traditionally an exclusive selection of clubs has become a common standard: the professional has become firmly middle class. This development is connected to various social trends. Haug (1976, 1988) described an erosion of the sacred position of professionals as a result of higher levels of education, ICT developments and the emancipation of the individual citizen. One could add, in the context of public services, that advances in auditing and monitoring methods and the rise of professional auditors have made performance measurable in more refined and accessible ways.

The typical example is the medical profession, with nurses and assistants taking over duties from general practitioners and medical specialists (Nancarrow and Borthwick 2005). Managers nowadays have their own curricula and degrees, their own networks and conventions, and suggest that theirs is a profession that can be learned (Noordegraaf 2008). The latter development has come under strong attack from people like Mintzberg, who has argued that the common MBA training method of learning from case studies is not experience, but voyeurism, and that management cannot simply be disconnected from context (Mintzberg 2004). Another example in public administration is that of the professional auditor. We will here not explore the interesting discussion concerning these occupations, but it is indicative of the fact that, as professional communities have mushroomed, professional status becomes ever more disputed.

This relates to a second development, which is that professionalism has been partially demystified. While the tasks performed by some professionals remain highly specialised and obscure to the layman, the knowledge is much more readily available and more transparent. We cannot perform open-heart surgery, at least not with a high chance of success; but we can read up on the whole procedure and its risks on the Internet. There may be websites comparing the performance of the hospital to others. This may make us appreciate the qualified surgeon’s skill, but it reduces the mystery and makes us less likely to regard the

surgeon as a god-like creature. People used to worship trees; then they worshipped professionals; and now they worship no-one. Professionalisation was a step in the rationalisation of society, undermining the position of priests and magicians. Now that same process is undermining the position of the professionals themselves. And as they come to seem less different from other occupations, they are under more pressure to accept the same working conditions.

Finally, the position of the state in regulating the professions has changed. Although the literature has paid much attention to cooptation of the state by powerful professions, there is less work on how the state influences the development of the professions. Yet clearly, historically the state has had a formative influence and, in this workshop on public governance, its current role merits special attention.

4. Conclusion: The state and the professions

From some of the literature, one would assume that the state is interfering with the natural autonomy of the professions. This is a-historical, since the state is and has traditionally been a formative influence on the development of the professions. So the question is whether and how state intervention in the professions has changed. What is different from the past is that, more than ever before, the state has a dual role. Not only is the regulator of markets (and market closure), it now also employs many professionals directly or, through public funding and regulation, indirectly influences their working conditions. Early scholars of professionalism focused on professionals that were not employed by public or private organizations, the so-called 'free' professions (Scott, 2009). Most of these former unbounded professionals are nowadays members of organizations and are subject to direct or indirectly control by governments. Consequently, the state has become increasingly involved in how the former free professions should be conducted.

The former role precedes the latter one: the state was regulating and effectively constructing professions long before public service providers came to be of any significance. Yet the traditional professions are heavily represented in the public services, so the latter role is more than a footnote. This is of course no coincidence: these services were deliberately kept in the public sphere and not organised through the market mechanism. From a Weberian perspective, one could argue that this was market closure elicited by the professions

themselves. From another, more functionalist perspective, one could argue that the knowledge was lacking to bring these knowledge-intensive occupations to the market. For instance, it was (and is) difficult to price medical treatment and judge performance adequately. Advances in performance measurement and accounting methods, rising education levels and greater availability of information have made that necessity less acute. Although the debate over performance measurement and its excesses of simplicity rages on, there is no denying that there has been much progress in the development of indicators that allow us to assess the costs and quality of public services. Also, there are more organisations (auditors and the media) willing to assemble and disseminate such information, and more citizens with the capacity to understand and use it. As a result, there is less need to shield the profession; and the professions lose the legitimacy to safeguard their position.

Where this leads is an interesting question, related to one's interpretation of the role of professionalism.

In any case, it makes the supposed struggle between managers and professionals grander, or less grand, than it seems in the public administration literature. It is grander, in that it represents forces in society reshaping the status positions of occupations. It is less grand, because management is in fact not a very important factor in the decline of professional autonomy. There are structural drivers of this development that go beyond management fashions or politics. Add to this the confusion over different aspects of service work, and the story of the manager-professional opposition seems less stable than the next Dutch Cabinet. Even if such an opposition exists, it is, in T.H. Lawrence, a sideshow of a sideshow.

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