

## **Professional Projects**

A great deal of work on the professions has historically been dominated by the attempt to provide universal definitions of what constitutes the foundations of professionalism. However, Hanlon, for example, defines this approach as sterile and laments the ink that has been wasted on semantic nuances; after all, professionalism is not a static concept but ‘the product of a dialectical relationship with its environment’, (Hanlon, 1999, p.3). Indeed, the study of professionalism has moved beyond an earlier taxonomic concern with who is in and who is out to the historically grounded study of professionalisation; the processes and circumstances through which occupations pursue, negotiate and maintain professionalism. At the heart of this lies the concept of the professional project (Larson, 1977), which can be defined as the systematic attempt by occupations to translate a scarce set of cultural and technical resources into a secure and institutionalised system of occupational and financial rewards so to pave the way for collective mobility and social advancement.

Using ‘professional project’ as a conceptual tool usefully establishes the ‘concrete, historically bounded character of professionals as empirical entities’ (Witz, 1992: 64). These ‘empirical entities’ may become established through occupational claims to professionalisation – even if such a claim is never realised (Freidson, 1983; Witz, 1992). Following from this, different occupations, due to their own individual circumstances, may present different stages, as well as different patterns, of professionalisation. Law, together with medicine, represents the archetypal model of the *established* profession. It presents the formal traits traditionally associated with professionalism, thus providing an authoritative example and benchmark for occupations embarking on professional projects (Etzioni, 1969; Johnson, 1972). Teaching and other occupations like nursing have been treated as *semi-professions* (Etzioni, 1969). Whilst it presents many of the structural and organisational traits usually associated with check-list or trait-based approaches to professionalism (MacDonald, 1995), teaching has traditionally enjoyed less autonomy over its work, less control over its knowledge base and weaker forms of professional association and governance (not to mention less rewards and social status). Hence, teaching appears as an incomplete or subordinate professional project. Finally, occupations such as management and various forms of consultancy, may have historically displayed an unwillingness or incapability to professionalise. However, certain sections of these broad occupational groups are increasingly entertaining professional ambitions as illustrated by a preoccupation with formal closure, a growing attention to occupational self-regulation and the development of strong professional institutions. Thus, these occupations can be considered as *new* or *aspiring* professions (Goode, 1969).

Professionalism is inevitably a politically charged project accomplished through a sustained tactical campaign which includes the nurturing and mobilization of strategic alliances, which capitalise on their proximity with centres of established power (Larson, 1977; MacDonald, 1995; Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990), the deployment of material and ideological resources such as appeals to technical competence, ethical standards and public interest, so to render their privileges and monopolistic claims more palatable (Freidson, 1970), and the fending-off of jurisdictional challenges posed by competing groups equipped with alternative forms of cultural capital (Abbott, 1988). This is a fluid,

dynamic and contested process which is rooted in the spatially and historically contingent negotiations between distinct actors. Gendered, and other ascriptive criteria such as class and race, have historically played an important role in the unfolding of professionalisation projects, after all the establishment and maintenance of professional jurisdictions involve processes of occupational and social closure which restrict 'access to rewards and opportunities to a limited circles of eligibles' (Parkin, 1974: 3) thus excluding the incompetent, the undesirable or simply the outsider. Such exclusionary mechanisms continue to be reproduced and reinforced through the defensive strategies, ingrained beliefs and everyday practices of those who hold power in these institutions; normally white, male and middle-class (Davies, 1996; Pollert, 1996; Segal, 1987; Witz, 1992).

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