Professionals and professions

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This short essay explores whether it is possible to define, in a widely-applicable way, what is involved in being *a professional* and in being *a profession*. Both terms are used widely in everyday speech, in technical literature, by professional bodies and by governments, in education, and in academic fields such as sociology and organisation studies. However, there is no commonly-agreed definition of either in the English language, and large amounts of print have been devoted to explaining and arguing what is meant by both terms, either by way of generalisation or in relation to specific instances and applications. This paper adds to this discussion from a pragmatic and realist perspective.

My approach here starts from first principles and attempts to follow a logical flow, rather than beginning with some of the multitude of definitions that have been proposed elsewhere. I am as much influenced by what might be called phenomenological usage – i.e. by people using the words in an informed operational manner – as by academic discussions. While I have included a few sources this isn't by any means a literature review, and I have taken the view that too many references would extend and maybe cloud what aims to be a brief and fairly straightforward discussion.

Professionals

I start with the idea of *a professional*, as without having an understanding of what it is to be a professional it seems to me extremely difficult to develop any sort of grounded understanding of what *a profession* might be. Colloquially, the term is used in at least two senses, one contrasted with amateur to mean someone who does something for a living, and the other having more a sense of seriousness and purpose, as in the phrase 'a true professional' with its overtones of competence, judgement and probity. The first of these doesn't actually enhance understanding greatly, but has become a legitimate use of the word in the absence of a suitable synonym – 'worker' has a different connotation (and doesn't necessarily imply remuneration), and the perhaps more apposite 'occupational' has not become used as a noun. An alternative, more specific use has connotations of income, status, and having a career rather than a job, as well as possibly being a member of a recognisable profession – the last leading to something of a circular discussion that logically requires 'profession' to be defined first.

The root of the word 'professional' is the Latin verb *profiteri*, which means to profess, as in making a public declaration such as a monastic vow. *Profiteri* has a sense of both staking a claim and making a commitment; 'professor' derives from the same root. This points to competence and commitment rather than career or status, and also requires there to be something that is committed to. Extrapolating, a modern interpretation of *profiteri* might be to commit to a particular ethos, field of knowledge and way of working. Again this has the potential to lead into a circular discussion, but it does not need to if what is professed to can be defined individually rather than as a common field called 'a profession' (or, for a professor, an academic discipline). A key distinction thus starts to emerge between 'a professional' and a worker, job-holder, or member of an occupation: the former makes a commitment to his or her field in a way that the latter does not need to. This leads to three further observations. The first is that a professional does not need to work in 'a profession' as commonly considered, but can work professionally in a field not normally accorded 'professional' status, or one that is emerging, the preserve of only a few

scattered practitioners, or even unique. The second is that, of two people with essentially the same job, one can approach their field in this professional manner, while another may simply treat it as a means of trading time for money. The third is that the second observation applies equally in occupations normally considered 'professional', even in the face of formal requirements for qualifications, continuing development and so forth.

At this point I will introduce one reference, on professions rather than professionals, though particularly apposite to the latter. This is Hoyle and John's 1995 book on teaching as a profession, which among other things attempts to define what it is that makes teaching – in the absence of a formal means of association and self-governance, and increasing micro-management by the state – a profession. To provide a brief summary, the authors conclude that professions are characterised by their expert knowledge; an ethos that ultimately serves the public good; and independence of thought and judgement that transcends any employment or contractual relationship. These characteristics can be applied just as easily to professionals, and they remain close to what is implied by *profiteri*. While it is possible to be a member of a profession without embodying them, they suggest that *being a professional* in this way is principally a matter of *being professional,* or what might be called (though the term has been borrowed and given other meanings) [individual] professionalism.

Finally for professionals, a note on level. Operational definitions of professions often state that they are 'higher-level' occupations, or require training that is of university level, or something similar. A parallel definition could be applied to professionals, but phrasing it in terms of higher education or of a particular qualification level appears somewhat arbitrary, as it depends on what is accepted as relevant to the particular level in a given national system or tradition. A less context-dependent feel for level might be gained by considering what 'expert knowledge', as mentioned above, means. An interpretation that seems to work across contexts is that it involves understanding underlying principles and concepts that inform practice, how these relate to one another, and how they relate to specific facts and theories and to practice itself. It also requires some understanding of kind of knowledge is valid and useful in relation to practice, and how it can be acquired, tested and challenged (I am borrowing here from another source, Christopher Winch's 2014 chapter on professional knowledge). This is different from simply accumulating a large body of knowledge that can be drawn on at will (necessary though that is in some professional fields), and it is also more subtle than the ideas of objectivity and working from an appropriate evidence-base.

Problems in conceptualising professions

A problem in trying to define 'a profession' as something more specific than 'an occupation' (from *occupare*, implying no more than an activity which takes up one's time) is that there are no easy definitions that actually work. At one time it was common to posit various characteristics or 'traits' that a profession needed to have, such as a distinctive body of knowledge, a code of practice, an educational requirement or entry-gate (by the late twentieth century often with the addition that this should be at university level), a governing body of some kind, and possibly some form of state recognition. While this has been out of favour in sociological studies of professions for three decades or more, it still appears regularly in more practice-oriented literature (and in other academic fields such as organisation studies and education, as well as those of professions themselves). The problem with this approach is that almost every characteristic that is proposed fails to fit with at least one group that is commonly considered 'a profession', some are shared with groups not widely thought of as professions, and some are at least

partly dependent on the legal, political or educational systems in which the proposed profession operates. As a variation on this, it might be argued that from a pool of such characteristics, a majority are needed to be considered 'a profession'; but again this will rule out some obviously professional occupations while admitting various organised trades and technical occupations. Some recent authors such as Thomas Brante have argued that the only common feature connecting professions is the presence of expert, scientifically-based knowledge, though apart from appearing somewhat one-dimensional this begs the question of where arts-based professions fit (I am also reminded of Hugh England's discussion of social work as a profession, which provides a compelling argument against the purely 'scientific' view). Hoyle and John's three characteristics mentioned previously perhaps have slightly more traction, though the presence of a public-minded ethos, and even independent thought and judgement, are not the strongest features of every occupation that might be considered a profession; they may be better regarded as ideals or facets of professionalism (used in the sense of being professional) rather than as defining traits of professions.

An ostensible alternative to the 'trait' approach is the use of ideal types, commonly medicine or law, occasionally one or two others. Two problems with this are that it immediately prioritises one type of profession over another, and begs the question of why the particular profession(s) are chosen as ideals (why not for instance one of the other ancient professions such as the priesthood or university teaching?). In answering this question it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that ideal types provide a proxy for the trait approach: medicine or law are selected because they embody the characteristics that the author deems desirable, or because they are seen as having been successful and therefore their characteristics are held up as the ones to aspire to. A limitation here is that the chosen archetypes thrive, or thrived, under a particular set of conditions that are not mirrored for all or even most professional groups. To take medicine as an example, at least in most European and Anglophone countries it is atypical in how it is organised and to an extent in its training pattern; in Britain, the complex system of regulatory oversight body, professional regulator, representative association, Royal Colleges and health service deaneries is an extreme outlier when compared with the more common arrangement of a single, self-governing professional association.

A third possibility is provided by the 'social construct' approach, which considers how occupations are construed as professions (and, in its pragmatic application, which occupations this applies to). An overlapping but different set of criteria tend to emerge from studies based on this perspective, including things such as having authority and being sought out for expert opinions, and it can produce slightly different and sometimes surprising results (e.g. business managers and military officers) compared with the two approaches above. While for the purposes of research this is at least mildly compelling, there are some obvious weaknesses for using it for definitional purposes: when applied as a sorting tool it either reverts to a form of trait approach, or it can capture inaccurate and biased or out-of-date perceptions of different occupational groups.

To conclude this section, it is relevant to mention the many studies and expositions, most from the final decades of the twentieth century (though some drawing on earlier foundations), that consider how professions interact with each other, with other occupations, with markets, with governments, and with society in general. Authors such as Abbott, Bledstein, Freidson, Johnson, Larson and others were not primarily concerned with defining professions, but by discussing how they 'work' from different perspectives their writing provides additional insights into aspects of professions that are largely missing from trait-based accounts. From a strict definitional viewpoint, these studies effectively only contribute

additional characteristics that apply in different degrees to professions: so for instance according to Larson, professions act to create market or employment monopolies (but this doesn't apply to all, and so do many organised occupations and trades that are rarely regarded as professions). If however it is desired to weigh various pieces of evidence for and against an occupation being considered as a profession, they offer more dynamic facets to consider than the static ones of the trait approach. At least, it is now more common for considered discussions of the evolution of occupations as or into professions to bring in some of these aspects rather than simply plotting progress against a list of characteristics.

From professionals to professions

If it is possible to have a reasonably clear notion of what a professional is, this suggests a more constructive starting-point for thinking about professions than the somewhat stale perspectives offered by traits, ideal types and social constructs. As mentioned earlier it is not always necessary to be part of an identifiable profession in order to be 'a professional', and although a few professionals will be operating in individually-defined fields most will be part of what can be considered a professional community or community of practice. Such a community could be said to exist when a group of professionals are working in broadly the same field and identify, by means that may be formal and highly organised or informal and loosely-bounded, as having common interests relating to their practice or to the principles underpinning it (as opposed to being restricted for instance to employment- or business-related matters): effectively, they are *professing to a field of work in common*. There are of course matters of degree in deciding when such a community has actually formed as well as in some cases the extent to which it is composed of professionals, but as a conceptual unit it is somewhat easier to define than 'a profession'.

The next obvious question is how a 'professional community' relates to 'a profession'. Some professional communities are quite clearly professions by whatever criteria are used, or at least specialist groups within professions. There are however examples whose status as 'professions' can be debated. Two that I have worked with and written about are vocational rehabilitation and family mediation, both of which might be regarded as nascent professions that are emerging from the intersections between more established groups as attitudes and ways of working are changing. Others appear as new technology creates the possibility of new applications and thence demand for new specialists; many such communities have appeared in recent years in the information and communications field, without on the whole becoming formalised in the same way as the traditional engineering professions. Yet others may have a longer history, but struggle for various reasons to gain acceptance as professions, sometimes in the face of advancing technology; indexers are an example here. Further examples are provided by fields that for some are primary professions and for others are occasional or supplementary activities; mediation is one instance of this, but training and development provides an example of a much larger such community (and one that, despite its size, can be partly absorbed by the better-defined communities of teaching or personnel management).

If the question is asked 'is vocational rehabilitation a profession?' (or mediation, or multimedia design, or training and development), the answer is bound to be inconclusive: it depends on the criteria that are used. For some people who practise them, they are very definitely professions; for others who are trying to classify occupations as professions or otherwise, they may fail to meet critical criteria. In some respects professions have a 'know it when you see it' quality that involves tacit weighing up of many different sources of evidence, but the criteria used to make the final judgement (and the emphasis given to each) will depend on the perspective and bias of the person doing the judging. 'Profession' as a

category is therefore perennially problematic. The implication of this is not that it should be avoided (after all it has a long history of being useful), but it does mean that the word must either be used casually in the knowledge that it will subject to differing interpretations, or given an operational definition for the purpose of the particular discussion.

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