



## Professions and organizations: A European perspective



David M. Brock<sup>a, \*</sup>, Mike Saks<sup>b, c, d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Guilford Glazer Faculty of Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

<sup>b</sup> University Campus Suffolk, UK

<sup>c</sup> University of Lincoln, UK

<sup>d</sup> University of Toronto, Canada

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 16 November 2015

Accepted 16 November 2015

Available online 12 December 2015

#### Keywords:

Europe

Professions

Organization

Neo-Weberianism

Neo-institutionalism

### ABSTRACT

This article surveys the literature from two complementary traditions on understanding professions in organizations – namely, the sociological analysis of professions and the more managerialist organizational theory. Notwithstanding their strong North American roots, these strands are brought together to provide a blended European perspective on professions in organizations based on the now dominant and interrelated neo-Weberian and neo-institutionalist theories. Initially centering on North American roots, it is noted that the European literature deriving from this blended theoretical base has been mushrooming in recent years. The range of issues addressed by this research is highlighted with reference to a number of specific professional groups in Europe. We then focus on a cohesive case study on the professions and organizations in healthcare, to which so much attention has been given by researchers in this field.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

The contemporary research area of professions and organizations can be considered both as a branch of the sociology of professions (Saks, 2016 *forthcoming*) and of the organizational theory that studies the managerial aspects of professional work (Brock, Leblebici, & Muzio, 2014). In the literature these two aspects have all too rarely been brought together, but this article attempts to do so in a blended manner in over-viewing key aspects of professions working in organizations. It focuses particularly on the European context from which some of the most exciting work is now emerging. This paper outlines the growth of the European contribution in these two traditions from what were originally heavily North American roots. It then goes on to discuss the notion of professions and their organizational setting and how they may most helpfully be analyzed, building on these traditions. Finally, the paper considers European research published in English-speaking sources on specific professions in their organizational context – illustrating this in more depth through a case study of work on the health professions, before drawing the paper to a conclusion.

From the standpoint of sociological theories of professions, the

field of professions and organizations was heavily based on work from the United States, with a range of contributors spanning from Talcott Parsons at Harvard University to Eliot Freidson at New York University. This work was paralleled by an increasing range of literature on professions and their organizational context from Britain, the early span of which was overviewed by Millerson (1964). This initial research was taken forward in new directions in Britain by such contributors as Terry Johnson at the University of Leicester and Michael Burrage at the London School of Economics. At this stage, there was little work on professions and organization in the sociological tradition emerging from continental Europe, but this was to expand greatly especially around the start of the twenty-first century. At this time, as Adams (2015) points out, there was a burgeoning amount of published research on this subject in journals, books and book chapters – with a particular Western European and Canadian interest in state–profession relations and professional regulation. As Adams has also helpfully shown in her review of the sociological literature, the focus in the United States has shifted to a large degree from regulatory issues to the organizational challenges faced by professional groups – no doubt because of the increasingly strong corporatist environment that has prevailed there.

In the case of the parallel strand of more managerially oriented organizational theory, the literature has centered on an interest in such areas as professional service firms, public sector professional

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [dmb@bgu.ac.il](mailto:dmb@bgu.ac.il) (D.M. Brock).

service organizations, multinational and transnational private corporations, together with the organizational implications for the expert knowledge workers that we term professionals. Here the field also has strong North American origins, with most of the early concepts, theories and empirical findings published by scholars based in Canada and the United States. For example, here important advances developed around writers like Richard Scott at Stanford University, Henry Mintzberg at McGill University, and Royston Greenwood and Bob Hinings at Alberta University. The initial dominance of the field by North America is indicated in the seminal review chapter by Powell, Brock, and Hinings (1999), where scarcely a reference is cited from European based scholars. However, fast-forwarding to the more recent overview of this area by Empson, Muzio, Broschak, and Hinings (2015), about one third of the references are by scholars currently based in Europe – even though much of the foundational material harks back to North American work from the latter half of the twentieth century.

Further evidence of this more recent trend in both the sociological and organizational literature towards a more Euro-centered focus on professions and organization is that some two-thirds of the twenty competitively peer-reviewed articles published by the new *Journal of Professions and Organization* in 2014 and 2015 have first authors based in Europe. And while these trends may or may not be significant, it is claimed in this paper that the contribution of European scholars to the field of professional organization is not only substantial, but also distinctive (Chia, 2014). Here Adams (2015) has indicated that the European concentration on regulation and policy represents the most marked difference from the United States literature on professions and organization – although Canadian scholars, as well as those in Australia, have also prioritized this area. However, in all these countries there are many overlapping fields of study of professions – ranging from considerations of gender and ethnicity to discussions on organizational autonomy and inter-professional working. Nonetheless, there seems to be somewhat less commonality with Eastern European societies like Russia where the study of professions is only slowly establishing itself following their disestablishment after the Bolshevik Revolution and their current gradual, and by no means inevitable, re-emergence under President Putin (Saks, 2015b).

## 2. Theories of professions and organizations

But what exactly is a profession in this regard? Classically there have been great disputes over this term with the early Anglo-American sociological literature based on defining such groups in terms of such unique characteristics as expertise and altruism that differentiated them from other occupations and enabled them to play a positive role in the wider society (see, for example, Greenwood, 1957; Goode, 1960). This interpretation, however, was seriously questioned following the more skeptical counter cultural years in the mid-1960s/1970s because, amongst other things, of the lack of agreement on the key aspects of professions; unthinkingly taking professional ideologies on trust; and failing to understand professions in the context of a conflictual social structure based on social class divisions – where professions themselves typically follow their own self-interests in increasing their income, status and power (Saks, 2012). As a result of such critiques of the more sugar-coated taxonomic interpretations of professions and the vulnerability of a number of the theoretical alternatives to these to the charge of being too abstract and self-fulfilling, the neo-Weberian approach to professions has emerged as the mainstream theoretical orthodoxy in analyzing professional groups in organizational and other contexts.

The neo-Weberian perspective on professions is based on the concept of exclusionary social closure drawn from the work of the

late nineteenth/early twentieth century social theorist Max Weber. Professions in this respect are seen as being primarily centered on the establishment of state underwritten occupational monopolies in the market in neo-liberal economies, linked to the realization of professional projects based on favourable socio-political conditions and astute occupational strategies. In this process, professions are held to be able to regulate market conditions in their own favour by restricting opportunities to a limited group of eligibles – characteristically leading to an increase in their income, status and power (Parkin, 1979). This is well illustrated by the cases of medicine and law in Britain and the United States which are seen as key exemplars of occupational groups that have won monopolies in the market supported by the state (Berlant, 1975; Burrage, 2006). Although they vary in form from *de facto* to *de jure* monopolies and were established through the federal government and state-by-state licensure respectively, they share core similarities. They can also be seen as at the head of a hierarchy of professions in terms of power and dominance in the market, not just within national boundaries but also across international jurisdictions – including in Britain in relation to the European Union, with its mutual recognition of qualifications (Olgiati, 2003).

This theoretical perspective on profession has many advantages when considering professionals in organizational structures in the Anglo-American context – not least being the definitional clarification it provides, based on the legally circumscribed boundaries of professions. However, neo-Weberian analyses of profession have themselves at times come under attack for being applied with insufficient empirical rigour; being overly critical of professional groups; and failing to place professions and professionalization in the context of the wider occupational division of labour (Saks, 2010). Nonetheless, these criticisms do not so much relate to a design fault, as the occasionally inappropriate operationalization of the neo-Weberian perspective. More pertinent here is the claim by Sciuilli (2005) that, whilst the concept of exclusionary social closure may fit Britain and the United States, it has little wider relevance in Europe. It is of course true that this neo-Weberian model of professions has not historically been as prevalent in continental Europe (Collins, 1990), in part because professionals are often embedded in government bureaucracies (Evetts, 2000). However, there is a continuum of arrangements, and many European societies have forms of exclusionary closure in relation to at least some occupational groups – including in countries such as Germany (see, for instance, Kuhlmann & Saks, 2008; Rogowski, 1995). Together with a more holistic theoretical approach recognizing the importance of understanding failed and ongoing as well as successful attempts at professionalization, this brings any European analysis clearly within a neo-Weberian purview.

Nonetheless, as Adams (2015) observes, one of the most frequent current themes of the international sociological literature on professions relates to challenges facing professions. In Europe, this reflects changes in the socio-political environment in which professions work, with the stronger emergence of neo-liberalism – variously linked to the rise of the New Public Management, entrepreneurialism, marketization and integrated work organizations (Svensson & Evetts, 2010). These trends have led to discussions about deprofessionalization and the declining autonomy of professions – especially in the context of the United States where there have been the most powerful trends towards corporatization (Saks, 2015b). Such developments have also been theorized through the employment by Evetts (2013) of the concept of organizational professionalism, as opposed to occupational professionalism based on the concept of social closure. This notion is intended to reflect the growing bureaucratization, centralization and rationalization of the work environments of professions – centered more on the Weberian notion of legal-rational authority.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1014790>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1014790>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)