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A professionalization framework to understand the structuring of work

Sylvain Bureau ^a, Jean-Baptiste Suquet ^{b,*}

^a ESCP-EAP, 79 avenue de la République, 75543 Paris cedex 11, France

^b Reims Management School, 59 rue Pierre Taittinger, 51100 Reims, France

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Summary The notion of professionalization is widely used both by managers and researchers. This use questions the traditional definition of profession. This paper reviews a book published in 1988 – The System of Professions – written by a sociologist, A. Abbott. Though this book had a strong impact in the field of the sociology of professions, it has remained unknown by many researchers in management science. His pragmatic approach to the concepts of profession and professionalization helps achieve better understanding of work structuring and as a consequence can be useful to address issues such as human resources management, organizational control or even the management of information systems.

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Introduction

Professionalization, professionalism, professional: these words are more and more used by managers (Evetts, 2003). In management science, the professions are not an object of research *per se*. Researchers tend to use a common representation of what a profession is. This definition was conceptualized in the field of the sociology of professions (Dubar and Tripiet, 1998; Freidson, 2001; Menger, 2003). It is grounded on a specific perspective: the *trait approach* (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Etzioni, 1969; Greenwood, 1957). A profession is in this perspective characterized by a certain number of traits, six in the original

definition proposed by Flexner (1915): ‘professions involve essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility; they derive their raw material from science and learning; this material they work up to a practical and definite end; they possess an educationally communicable technique; they tend to self-organization; they are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation’.

This approach is idiosyncratic to a certain context – that of Anglo-Saxon countries – and tends to be obsolete owing to organizational and technological evolutions (Freidson, 1994; Paradeise, 1988; Vollmer and Mills, 1966). These transformations lead to an increasing number of professionals. According to several empirical studies, people belonging to professions are more and more numerous (Bishop, 1997; Silvestri and Lukasiewicz, 1991):

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jean-baptiste.suquet@reims-ms.fr (J.-B. Suquet).

"Professional occupations are projected to grow the fastest, in large part because they are concentrated in some fast-growing industries such as healthcare and social assistance; and professional, scientific, and technical services" (Hecker, 2004).

Moreover, these professionals have been working more and more inside or with organizations for the past fifty years (Barley and Gideon, 2006; Hughes, 1965; Scott, 1966). One sole piece of data is very useful to understand this trend: in the USA at the end of the 80s, 50% of doctors and lawyers, who are considered as the archetypes of what a profession is (Goode, 1969), were working inside organizations (Abbott, 1988, p. 61).

To avoid a sticking point on this representation of what a profession should be, several researchers used other more process-oriented perspectives, which contributed to new frameworks: Adler and Kwon propose the term of *civic professionalism*, (Adler and Kwon, 2006), Barley and Kunda put forward an *itinerant professionalism* (Barley and Kunda, 2006), Bureau focuses on *organizational professionalization* (2007).

Although these researchers refer to very different phenomena, they all reject the *trait approach*. To better understand the debate and to know why the traditional definition of profession and professionalization should be avoided, we suggest reading: *The System of Professions. An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Abbott, 1988). To give the reader the gist of the matter, our paper synthesizes the framework of this well-known American sociologist: Andrew Abbott. This author proposed a shift from questions about social essence towards questions about social change. To do so, he suggests: firstly, to analyze a profession by focusing on its work not its institutional forms; secondly, to stress the many variables that affect the contents and control of that work; and finally, to link them within an evolving system. He collected and confronted data on different levels of analysis: the system of professions, intra-group functioning, and the socio-cultural environment (Abbott, 1988, p. 315). The whole purpose was to understand the evolution and stabilization of the system.

Why should we focus on his work? Well, the new perspective he offers is not only useful for sociologists. Actually, his "book should be (...) required reading for anyone interested in understanding the relationship between occupations and organizations and, more generally, the dynamics of occupational change and influence in society" (Tolbert, 1990).

We first describe this new perspective on profession by characterizing Abbott's framework. Then, we suggest three avenues of research in management: human resources management and organizational control; service management; and the management of information systems.

Abbott's framework

Andrew Abbott is a sociologist, professor in the Department of Sociology and the College at the University of Chicago. Known for his famous work on the division of expert labor, Abbott has also pioneered algorithmic analysis of social sequence data. He has written on the foundations of social science methodology and on the evolution of the social sciences and the academic system¹. His major work is the

one that we present in this paper: *The System of Professions* (1988). This book, a theoretical analysis of the professions and their development, won the ASA's Sorokin Award² in 1991. Its impacts have not been limited to the sole sociology of professions as it contributes to the theory of work in general (Kellermann, 1990). Abbott addresses very general questions such as that of boundaries, case study methodologies or even cognitive processes. Since 1988, his framework has been used in sociology by many authors (more than a thousand citations according to Google scholar) but also to a certain extent in management with several references to Abbott's book in research related to professional firms or professions like accountants or lawyers (Dezalay, 1995; Sikka and Willmott, 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Walker, 2004).

In the next sections, we present his framework and explain why it is considered as a major shift in the conceptualization of professionalization.

What professionalization is not

Abbott refuses to consider professionalization as a process which leads to a pre-defined situation which would respect a certain number of criteria. At the very beginning of his book, he considers that a strict definition of profession cannot be relevant when confronting empirical data and suggests defining it as "exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases" (Abbott, 1988, p. 8).

The concept is then so loosely defined that he came to the conclusion that one should not try to define what a profession is at all:

"Because the term 'profession' is more an honorific than a technical one, any apparently technical definition will be rejected by those who reject its implied judgments about their favorite professions and non professions. To start with definition is thus not to start at all" (Abbott, 1991, p. 18).

Many authors wanted to prove that there was a common historical model for every profession and suggested different visions among which the functionalist whereby the profession is a way to control the asymmetric relationship with clients (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Marshall, 1950; Parsons, 1939), the structuralist vision, whereby the profession gives autonomy to its members (Caplow, 1954; Miller, 1964; Wilensky, 1964), and the monopolistic vision whereby the profession is a way to dominate and protect a statute (Freidson, 1982; Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977). In this literature, examples of professions are highly specific. At the end, there are no groups which really match all the traits of a profession:

"English barristers do not necessarily train in university but rather by apprenticeship and eating dinners 'in hall'. American clergy do not generally have codes of ethics (...). Yet both group are unmistakably professions (...). People don't want to call automobile repair a pro-

¹ <http://home.uchicago.edu/~aabbott/bio.html>.

² The Sorokin Award is the highest form of recognition to scholarly publications given by the American Sociological Association (<http://sociology.princeton.edu/News/2002/>).

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