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What Is a Profession, and What Are the Prerequisites for Being a Profession?

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In this chapter, I will elaborate what is meant by a profession and show some central definitions and characteristics of occupational groups called professions. It is necessary to clarify this term for the forthcoming discussions about whether leadership may or should be a profession. However, because this is a very comprehensive discussion in this research field, it cannot be reproduced to its fullest here. I have chosen some of the most common characteristics and important issues about professions that I presume are relevant to the other chapters.

An underlying reason for asking whether management can or should be a profession is that professions have had special positions and roles in society that other occupations do not have. For society, professionalization can provide safety and an assurance for high qualifications and solid skills. For occupational groups, professionalization has given reputation, money and power; the search for this type of legitimacy can qualify

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leadership as a profession (Khurana 2007, p. 23). We see this clearly in traditional professions such as medical doctor, lawyer, psychologist and priest, which have historically held high prestige and power in society. Professionalization can thus be attractive to both the community and the professional groups themselves, and this book asks whether leadership itself should also be a profession.

In this chapter, I will not discuss this question, but look into what qualifies as a profession and highlight some conditions of professional status that will be particularly relevant in the discussion of leadership as a profession. I will do so by referring to definitions and characteristics of professions and then look into some of the professional studies that have analyzed contextual features that affect the relationship between professions, organizations, authorities and users. In spite of this demarcation, however, I would like to begin by referring to professions as a research field and some main features in this field.

About Professional Research

Though professions have been studied predominantly by sociologists, other researchers, such as historians, political scientists, economists, educators and psychologists have also studied professions using their distinctive academic approaches. Thus, professional studies have evolved into a specific field of research (Molander and Terum 2008, p. 21). The topics within this field of research have changed over time and have many phases. The main theme of this chapter, *characteristics of professions*, was a theme in the first phase of professional studies (Abbott 1988), and was also called the taxonomic approach (Saks 2012, p. 1). Fauske (2008) argues that this phase stretched until the 1960s, and, according to Abbott (1988), Carr-Saunders and Wilson's book, *The Professions*, from 1933, was one of the first comprehensive analyses of this period. Professionalization is related to general societal development and a development towards greater diversity in occupational groups. In general, industrialization and specialization in society increases the need for professional discretion in the workplace. This requires people with apt knowledge, who constantly update their skills and can work independently.

The studies in this phase attempted to find some unequivocal common features of professions that met these needs. These studies were later criticized for being mostly descriptive, without questioning the effects and consequences of professionalization, and without explaining the relationships between different factors. Ludviksen refers to criticism asserting that the taxonomic approach was: "... ideological, atheoretical, ahistorical and universalistic" (1993, p. 4).

This classical definition phase and taxonomic approach was followed by more critical studies of professional power until about 1990. Freidson's book, *Professional Dominance*, from 1970, and Johnson's book, *Professions and Power*, from 1972, are some examples from this phase. In this power phase, critical questions are asked about the criteria and basis for professions' status, and studies showed the unfortunate aspects of professionalization that come from specialization and professional monopoly (Khurana 2007). These studies also show examples of destructive conflicts between professions. A title that expounds on this is *The War in White – And the Purple Revolution That Went Away*¹ (Ramsdal 1994). And when the health sector experienced unexpectedly strong specialization and growth (Hansen 1979), the authorities saw the need to control costs by reducing the autonomy of the profession (Erichsen 1996). The need for professional discretion was also reduced, with increased standardization and more (comprehensive) regulations. In these studies, one sees both that the professional status does not follow clear criteria, and that professionalization also has several negative aspects. The third and final phase I will mention here has a more holistic approach that unites the different traditions (Fauske 2008, p. 31), as exemplified by Abbot's *The System of Professions*, of 1988, which uses the term *jurisdiction* to focus on the division of labor between professions.

This short and superficial review of the professional research field attempts to show that the answer to the question: "What are the characteristics of a profession?" is ambiguous, and its merits and criteria continuously challenged by the critical research tradition.

I will look further into what gives professional status, that is, what constitutes the premise of professional status, and then link this to the relationship between profession, government, organization and users—i.e., the context in which the professions are located. I start by presenting the definitions and characteristics of professions, which were important subjects in the first phase of professional studies.

Definitions and Characteristics of a Profession

The discussion of characteristics was, as mentioned, the central theme of the first profession studies and may also be called the “taxonomic approach”. Early profession studies attempted to create a consensus around what a profession is, and describe the different characteristics that occupational groups must have in order to be a profession. Although the term is disputed and there exist several different lists of characteristics, we can say that the common general characteristics of a profession comprise occupations with **a long formal education, ethical guidelines, and great freedom and autonomy** in their work. It is also correct to note that the professional occupations have **a monopoly** on a particular position and title (Torgersen 1972). Many lists have been developed with different content, but Freidson’s definition is an example of one of the most acknowledged lists (Brante 2011, p. 5):

1. A body of knowledge and skill which is officially recognized as one based on abstract concepts and theories and requiring the exercise of considerable discretion.
2. An occupationally controlled division of labor.
3. An occupationally controlled labor market requiring credentials for entry and career mobility.
4. An occupationally controlled training program which produces those credentials, schooling that is associated with ‘higher learning’, segregated from the ordinary labor market and provides opportunities for the development of new knowledge.
5. An ideology serving some transcendent value and asserting greater devotion to doing good work than to economic reward. (Freidson 2001, p. 180)

Brante is skeptical of many of these definitions, and believes that this and many other definitions neither allows us to distinguish between professions and other occupations, nor say anything about what is common to professions. He suggests his own definition: “Professions are: *Occupations conducting interventions derived from scientific knowledge of mechanisms, structures, and context*” (Brante 2011, p. 17, emphasis in original).

While I do not have the luxury in this chapter of being able to delve into the entirety of this discussion, it is sufficient for the purpose of this book to explore the main points of Freidson's characteristics and the definitions presented above. These topics include: (1) Education, competence and discretion, (2) Autonomy, ethical rules and self-control, and (3) Monopoly.

1. Education, Competence and Discretion

When professions have *long formal education* in a scientific field, we may call them specialists or experts, as Abbott does:

Professions were organized bodies of experts who applied esoteric knowledge to particular cases. They had elaborate systems of instruction and training, together with entry by examination and other formal prerequisites. (Abbott 1988, p. 4)

The "long formal education" consists of theoretical research-based knowledge paired with scientifically based methods that must be objective and neutral (Erichsen 1985, p. 165). This implies that the education was conducted at university level and has been extended to include a five-year master's program. Classic examples of such professions as these include doctors, lawyers and priests, while a semi-professional example would be a profession with only three years of education, such as teachers and social workers. Thus, there are differing opinions on what constitutes a profession in the most rigid definition of the term. If we are to follow Freidson's characteristics, a profession requires five years of training. Alternatively, others agree that a profession can be composed of three years of training, as long as the training and associated knowledge is research-based.

We also see that some characteristics of a certain profession or expertise are *esoteric* and exclusive; that knowledge is gained through years of study, and not readily available. This esoteric knowledge can be defined as knowledge "understood by or meant for only the selected few who have special knowledge or interest" (Abbott 1988, p. 4).

Discretion is a characteristic mentioned by Freidson (2001) to denote when tasks require specialized knowledge. If rules and standards were sufficient, there would be no need for specialists, experts or professional judgment. Subsequently, freedom and autonomy are a hallmark of professions.

2. Autonomy, Ethical Rules and Self-Control

A consequence of exclusive knowledge and professional understanding is that professions cannot be easily controlled, nor do they need to be, as they take care of many control aspects themselves. This gives the profession great autonomy and freedom in the actual workmanship. As pointed out in point 5 in Freidson's (2001) definition (see above), he believes that the quality of the work should be more important than economic reward. One way to ensure good quality work is to develop profession-specific ethical guidelines that the workers themselves control (Abbott 1988, p. 4). This applies not only to professions, but also to many occupations that have drawn up their own ethical guidelines. Ensuring and verifying that these ethical guidelines are followed can bring legitimacy and trust to the professions.

The thinking here is that it is the professionals themselves who know what qualifies as "good quality work", and thus what kind of education and competence is required; they know which skills are required for various tasks and thus how to divide labor. Abbott (1988) uses the term "jurisdiction" to show how the division of labor takes place, referring to an internal dynamics where professions compete for tasks. External relationships can also be part of the division of work. For example, authorities can give some professions authorization to complete certain tasks, and thus change the internal competition conditions between its neighboring professions.

Brante (2011) indicates that professions are the occupations that are deemed to provide access to the highest knowledge within a particular area, such as health. This gives legitimacy and authority, which in turn can explain that professions, under certain conditions, can control the division of labor or licensing within their area (without this control being granted externally).

Freidson also characterizes the autonomous position and self-checks of professions:

Professionalism may be said to exist when an organized occupation gains the power to determine who is qualified to perform a defined set of tasks, to prevent all others from performing that work, and to control the criteria by which to evaluate performance. (Freidson 2001, p. 12)

3. Monopoly

The monopoly point referred to by Freidson (2001) means that professions can only be filled by persons who have acquired a particular education. The professional group thus receives exclusive rights to both the jobs and the occupation-title (Torgersen 1972). The authorities give the professions the monopoly (Mastekaasa 2008), but the professions themselves control education and division of labor. When the monopoly gives exclusive rights to occupations, professions will be separated from the ordinary labor market (Freidson 2001), and the professions avoid much competition between each other. Abbott's *jurisdiction* concept (1988, p. 86) also refers to division of labor between professions, and Abbott describes it as an interdependent system. In addition, there are different degrees or levels of division of labor—i.e. degrees of formalization. However, the monopoly is a highly formalized division of labor, involving government agencies.

The monopoly is an example of how outer contextual relationships operate. The state's authorization can change conditions of professions. I will look at some more issues that affect the status and position of the profession by addressing some contextual features that affect the relationship between professions, organizations, authorities and users.

Context: Relationship Between Profession, Government, Organization and Users

In this section, I will explore some topics from professional research that may be particularly relevant in the discussion of whether leadership should be a profession that is not only related to the characteristics of the

professions themselves but also of more external circumstances. The contextual and external circumstances are, of course, very extensive, and the relationships between them and the internal professional relationships can be complex, but I have chosen two development features that problematize the profession's role: dedifferentiation, and de-professionalization.

Dedifferentiation

Composing the professions within new interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral organizational units is called institutional integration. This is a type of “dedifferentiation” that refers to a breach of the tendencies of specialization, or a reversal of the social differentiation process (Ramsdal et al. 1997). Sectors previously isolated from one another were integrated, while the organizational boundaries between them were demolished. One example is nurses who leave the health sector, or social workers who leave the social sector to become part of the education and training sector. Another type of dedifferentiation refers to the establishment of qualification profiles that span cross-established competence profiles and professions. Another example is horizontal centralization, which indicates that control over decision-making processes is divided between management and professionals so that management expands its decision-making authority at the expense of professionals. This expansion creates issues related to whether you can be both a specialist and, at the same time, safeguard the legitimacy of the profession, thus requiring interdisciplinary and comprehensive practice at the expense of specialist knowledge (Otterlei 1996).

Efficiency and financial management are on the agenda in most businesses. Bureaucratic management and control have become important instruments. Many businesses are influenced by New Public Management (NPM), with the introduction of market-like mechanisms and increased bureaucratic management. Another feature of the NPM is the user perspective, an idea that users should have greater influence on service design. These are tools and ideas that can come into conflict with the professional way of working and can limit professional work in key areas.

De-professionalization

Although many of the “new” professions are academized, development may not be one-sided in the direction of professionalization. Freidson (2001) is less concerned with the academicization of a profession, but instead interested in an organized profession capable of establishing a monopoly over certain tasks and their associated levels of control.

The professional work has its own logic that assumes special organizational preconditions for work. Freidson is concerned that professionalism loses against organizational forms based on market and bureaucracy. Monopoly is essential for professionalism, which directly contrasts the logic of a free market. Freedom to use discretion or to have a right of determination in work is inherently important for professionalism, which clashes with the management’s view that efficiency is gained by minimizing discretion.

There is largely a monopoly for positions in both health and social services, and education. The state is a key player in establishing monopolies for certain professions and here the legislation is central. Over recent years, it may seem that the state has become more reluctant to protect the occupational groups’ monopoly situation. Newer legislation requires, to a lesser extent, that certain occupational groups should be employed. Looking at the emergence of new occupations within the welfare field, these can also be interpreted from a deprofessional perspective. One example of this is User-Managed Personal Assistant (UMPA), a job category where the qualification requirements are linked to the needs of the particular user.

Freidson (2001) believes that professional work has its own logic that assumes special organizational prerequisites to function and is concerned that professionalism is losing business and market-based organizational forms. Ultimately, monopoly is essential for professionalism despite its contradictions with the logic of a free market.

The demand for education and skills concerning both questions about professional monopoly and labor (Mastekaasa 2008) also relates to the relationship between professions, science and clients, as Eckhoff (1967) refers to in his classical study. In this study, he shows that there is a mutual

dependency between these groups. Science gives professionals the ability to make accurate and informed decisions. These decisions, in turn, represent the benefits of this science. Furthermore, one could say that those who benefit from the professional's decisions, the users, are those who validate the profession's existence. This relationship between authorities, professions and users is also shown in Knut Dahl Jacobsen's phrase, "Experts are a danger to clients who are not protected by experts" (Jacobsen 1965, p. 160).² Jacobsen shows in his study that a lack of experts or professions within a sector can lead to the exclusion of user interests in policy design for a given area. Yngvar Løcken (1985) has used this as a starting point in his analysis of the role of the profession in society, and shows that professionals can, among other things, be spokesmen and instrumental strategists.

Conclusion: Management as a Profession?

As Seljelid (1995, p. 13) states, management can be a profession of its own, but professional management can also be associated with more than just a term for an occupation. Looking at leadership as a profession in the light of theoretic definitions, its issues of ethics, values and norms are highlighted. Do leaders have common norms and values for professional practice? If leadership is a profession with its own scientific and knowledge base with a direct link to tasks, one can, as for the other professions, create predictability and common standards. This will allow for verifiable and internal control.

The status, position and autonomy of traditional professions depend on professional legitimacy and trust, while leaders, for their part, achieve this space of action and freedom inherent to the position itself. What does the professional status add to leadership as a profession? Insufficient legitimacy? Expertise is a legitimacy criterion that leaders can acquire. Other traits include common standards and values. One can ask if leaders have these characteristics, and, perhaps more importantly, if leaders want them. Democratic legitimization is important for leadership, especially in Norway, which requires transparency over leader's dispositions and

ensures that decisions are justified (Byrkjeflot 1997, pp. 17–18). Can professional status be helpful in clarifying these justifications?

These are questions that arise from the review of the proficiency concept and professional studies, but I will leave this discussion for the following chapters.

From the hallmarks of professions, we can summarize some key points about what characterizes an occupation that is a profession: a long, formal education that provides research-based competence, the professional's own ethical guidelines, a high degree of freedom and autonomy, and monopoly. However, these characteristics are not absolute and they do not divide professions from other occupational groups. I have also shown that the research field is characterized by disagreement and that there are strong interests associated with professionalization. Ludviksen claims that political interests associated with professions, including their power and status, is a possible explanation for why the term is contested. The fragmentation reflects political opposites in the view of professions' place in the society (1993, p. 18).

In light of these circumstances, the conclusion as to what a profession is, as described by the criteria, is not clear and will depend on several different factors—including political ones.

Notes

1. The title is my translation.
2. My translation.

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