

SCIENCE FOR THE PROFESSIONS

Report no. 4

In search of a new theory of professions

BY JAN NOLIN



UNIVERSITY OF BORÅS
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THE PRESENT REPORT is the fourth in the report series *Science for the Professions*. The purpose of the series is to present results from ongoing and finished research projects at the University, as well as publishing contributions in an ongoing discussion about the profiling of science and applied methods within the framework of the idea of *Science for the Professions*. An annual output of four to six reports is the goal. The editor of the series is professor BJÖRN BRORSTRÖM, assistant editor is the chairman of the Research and Education Board KIM BOLTON. Members of the editorial staff committee are OLOV FORSGREN, LARS HALLNÄS, LARS HÖGLUND, KAJ LINDECRANTZ, MARIA NYSTRÖM and BENGT PERSSON. The committee's task is to assume responsibility for evaluation of contributions to the report and thereby for assuring it maintains a high standard. In certain cases external experts may be asked to leave their opinion.

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Abstract

RESEARCH ON PROFESSIONS is a troubled field marked by a reluctance to define its main concept: profession. In this text it is argued that the field has developed dominating perspectives that are of little use for professions themselves in developing identity, collaboration with other professions and increasing quality. Through a discussion of the main problems of the theory of professions, new solutions are suggested, together with a set of guidelines for a theory of professions that would be of use for professions and would-be professions. A number of main positions from earlier research are reviewed. Eight problems are seen as creating the current theoretical “dead end”. The author discusses an integrated set of solutions to resolve these problems.

Keywords: theory of professions, profession, professionalisation, professionalism

Preface

BJÖRN BRORSTRÖM | *professor*

‘SCIENCE FOR THE PROFESSIONS’ is the University of Borås’ motto. The expression underlines the importance, from the School’s perspective, of putting emphasis on the nearness in the relationship between academia and the working world. This trademark slogan also serves to demonstrate and accentuate the University’s special identity. Operations and activity at the University are based on the conviction that it is vital that research and teaching are carried out in collaboration and interplay with the business and industry sectors, as well as with actors and institutions in the cultural sphere and with the public sector. The notion of societal relevance in education and research is the University’s guiding light.

Interdisciplinarity, collaboration between disciplines and collaboration with representatives of society are crucial elements for the University of Borås. Our activity is directed towards increased cooperation with the professional sphere. As a consequence, it is only natural that we are interested in the very meaning of the concept and phenomenon that we call profession; what virtues does a professional have, how, as well as why, is the process of professionalisation developing?

This report, ‘In Search of a New Theory of Professions’, sees Jan Nolin questioning the dominating theory of professions. Nolin’s opinion is that the theory of professions has reached a dead end and needs to be renewed. Based on a description of a three-staged development of theories for professions and identification of eight problems, a stage four theory is outlined. This theory can, according to the author, be used to support professions in their everyday work.

The reasoning and interpretation found in the report is of substantial weight, it is stimulating and it is provocative. The author outlines the argument against the ruling theory and its implications very clearly.

This report is number four of the University’s report series ‘Vetenskap för profession’, ‘Science for the Professions’. It is an important contribution, and I am certain that it will be followed by intelligent reflection and

discussion, regarding both its content and its underlying message. I look forward to participating in these fruitful and vital discussions.

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I. Theory of professions of use for professions

Introduction

RESEARCH ON PROFESSION, professionalisation and professionalism has been dominated by sociological traditions such as social interactionism, Marxism and social contextualism. Since the 1970s, researchers in the field have concerned themselves with professions as institutions involved either in power struggles or with professions as practices no different from other occupations. Regardless of which, there has been little interest in producing something helpful in establishing a more congruent identity. Instead, researchers have identified professions as institutions seeking market monopolies, the “professional project” (Larson, 1977), and have been intent on building up a store of academic knowledge that would not influence the development of professions.

The starting point of the current text is radical and concerns this tension between, on the one hand, the needs of professions for theoretical tools to develop the quality of the practice and, on the other hand, a research field that have avoided the production of such tools. Put simply, I argue that professions need researchers to develop definitions, standards and theories concerning the key concepts of profession, professionalisation and professionalism in order to increase the quality of the professional practice of professionals. I also argue forcefully for the idea that professions are a type of occupation that are produced and maintained in a slightly different way than other occupations and that they therefore need to be studied as a set of separate cases. Furthermore, I maintain that researchers instead have manhandled the concepts of profession and professionalisation so that it has become difficult to use research as a starting point for practical work within professions and would-be professions themselves.

The overarching question that this text deals with is: What have been the basic problems of theory of professions that have hindered an articula-

tion of the concept of profession and how can these problems be constructively dealt with in order to support professions?

This is no doubt a difficult and ambitious task which entails breaking with earlier traditions rather than building on them. I will review what I consider are the main ideas of earlier research and see them as having been developed in three stages. I will thereafter articulate a rough outline of stage four theory of professions.

A complicated research field dominated by sociology

Theory of professions is a huge and extremely complicated research field with long historical roots. Still, it could, and perhaps should, be much larger. The theoretical development has been firmly dominated by Sociology. This has restricted the number of perspectives involved in defining professions and articulating their role in society. In addition, while Sociology offers a wide range of perspectives, only some of them have been involved in the field. Burrage (1990) argues that the influential work by Marx (with the concept of class) and Weber (ideal type of bureaucracy) have served to divert sociologists away from any interest in professions.

I would like to add that sociology of professions early on became associated with functionalism and its figurehead Talcott Parsons, who generally is considered to be the founder of the field of sociology of professions. As this tradition increasingly fell out of fashion in the early 1970s and forward, the negative associations to functionalism has created a dark cloud that has never lifted from the sociology of professions. In addition, contributions within theory of professions have been sporadic since the late 90s. From my perspective, this is in part a consequence of researchers refusing to define the concept of “profession”. Eventually, this creates what I call a “theoretical dead end”. As professions are not seen as apart from other occupations, there is really no reason to have a research area that studies professions. Theoretical development are instead pursued around the concept of “professionalism”, leaving “profession” without any clear definition.

The disposition of this text is as follows. First, I review earlier research and identify the elements to the “theoretical dead end”. Second, I identify eight problems where the current “power approach” seems to have been stuck. Finally, I will deal with these eight problems and in doing so outline, very roughly, a way out of the “theoretical dead end” into a set of ideas that can be used to support professions in society.

Theory of professions is a field that has been dominated by sociology and some of the most important theoretical instruments within sociology have with time been reproduced. I am not a sociologist and I do not intend to apply that kind of perspective. My background is in theory of science and, in a sense; I take my starting point in the power struggles within the research field, rather than in the strife between professions. My interest lies in the way that theoretical ideas of a certain phenomenon will impact on and change it. In a way, sociology of professions has seen itself fundamentally removed from the professions it studies. At the same time, professions and would-be professions are intimately connected to academia and have increasingly attempted to develop through a self-reflection on their own professional identity. In cases where professions have searched theories of professions for support, I would argue that they have not been helped much.

The sociological approach, such as it has been developed in recent decades, is explicitly distant from the needs of various social groups. As Freidson (1983), probably the most influential researcher in the field since 1980s, argues, it is not the task of sociology to make popular accounts or concepts more scientific. Instead, sociology studies how people in society construct labels such as professions and how they give legitimacy to certain occupations.

Three stages

Every scholar writing a text on professions will include a story of the development of the field. There is a great variety in these stories. Since this development is very complex, every account is by necessity a radical simplification. The research field has included a number of different perspectives and it is possible to talk about different contributions and emphasis from various schools of thought rather than a development in phases. The most common device is to talk about two stages: the older functionalistic and the new social contextual power approach. A three-stage approach is explicit in Sciulli (2005) and perhaps implied by Abbott (1988) and Macdonald (1995). I will introduce another variation of the three stages that highlights the way that researchers deal with the key concepts of profession and professionalisation. Very roughly, I see the research field as having undergone these three stages:

1. Profession 1930–1970. Professions are seen as instruments of enlightenment and a key function in the modernisation of society.

They are given a lofty status and the attributes describing them are categorised.

2. Professionalisation 1960–1980. The criteria that characterises a profession are seen as problematic. Researchers emphasise the process of professionalisation, rather than the problematic concept of profession. There's also an effort made to create a hierarchy of professions, semi-professions and non-professions. Furthermore, researchers also criticise the idea that professions serve the common good. Several researchers argue that professions are more about dominance than service.
3. Social context 1980–?. This tradition is also called “the power approach” (according to Macdonald (1995) erroneously so). Social interactionists had always had a contrarian perspective on professions and now these ideas became more influential. Postmodernism with its criticism of the modern project and enlightenment hits the field as well as neo-Weberian conflict theory. Ideals of profession and professionalisation are criticised as professions are seen as self-serving interest groups involved in a powerplay and in competition with each other for certain domains of knowledge and societal authority.

These three stages entail a simplification and it is important to note that several influential works can be difficult to fit into it. Perhaps most notably, the book by Larson (1977) is seen by Macdonald (1995) as highlighting a new approach, a step away from the tradition of social context. I would in part agree with this, since it has a focus on professionalism. However, it also has a focus on the ideology of professions, which is typical of stage three and of “the professional project”, which in my mind links it to stage two. It might also be possible to talk about a fourth stage of professionalism. Different researchers have returned to this ideal at times all since the 1930s. Freidson (2001) suggested an emphasis on the values of professionalism as a strategy for researching on professions without defining what a profession really is. Research on professionalism is, contrary to research on professionalisation and profession, somewhat lively and constitutes a specific tradition that I will not deal with in the current work. I will, however, briefly motivate the reason for this.

Professionalism: more than professions

Stage three research leaves little room for a constructive feedback to professions. One way out of this dilemma is to make another type of shift in research focus. Researchers avoid talking about what it is (essentialism) and also how to become it (the process of professionalisation) and instead analyse work procedures. This became the study of professionalism.

Freidson, who had been an influential figure in the field since the early 1970s, would increasingly focus on professionalism in the 1990s. In *Professionalism reborn: theory, prophecy and policy* (1994), he would outline the elements of a theory of professionalism, which built on the classical works of Durkheim and Weber. He further developed these ideas in *Professionalism: the third logic* (2001), in which he reasoned that professionalism could serve as a balance against the logic of the market and that of the organisation. Evetts (2003) traced ideas of professionalism as a value system back to the 1920s. Thereafter, a discussion on professionalism has been a kind of byproduct to the sociology of professions. Parsons (1954) articulated a number of criteria for the professions that also could be described as standards for professionalism as the basic idea was to be neutral and impartial independent of who the client was. This is also the reading Freidson (2001) brings forward.

Professionalism could thus be used to describe a value system or an ideology disconnected from the complex and controversial issue of the professions. In this way, there's an emphasis on the quality of service and this brings us back to the idea that professions are performing a certain function for society, making it into a better place by virtue of this value system.

Evetts (2003) effectively makes the same kind of criticism of professionalism as against the concept of profession. Professionalism, she argues, becomes an appealing ideology for occupational groups and it implicitly includes the power of defining problems and of controlling solutions.

Professionalism and new public management: a tool for controlling professions

Professionalism can give legitimacy to a privileged position of interpreting social structures and conflicts. Hanlon (1999) identifies the state as redefining professionalism as connected to the ideals of new public management, including commercial awareness and a focus on evaluating and management skills adapted to the given budget.

Combined with new public management, professionalism becomes a prisonhouse of standards that actually are promoted outside of academia, professional organisations and the professional herself. In essence, this leads to the classical discussion on professions being turned on its head. No longer is it a matter of autonomous professions controlling society, but of society controlling the professions. Professionalism is being imposed “from above”, rather than “from within”.

This kind of reasoning is the starting point for the monumental work by Krause (1996) in which different national settings develop their unique ways of controlling professions. In the US, a dominating capitalistic ideology pressures professions. In Britain, class is the most important dimension for analysing professions, since it is the elite graduates of the private preparatory schools and then of Oxford and Cambridge who eventually constitute the leadership in all spheres of public life. In France, the strong state supply professionals as civil servants. While the distinction between the state and the private sector becomes somewhat blurred in the case of France, Krause sees it as almost irrelevant in the case of Italy as the state includes so many of the corporations.

Of the five countries studied, only in Germany do professionals retain a high status. In the other countries, the trend seems to be that professions are redefined “from something special to just another way to make a living” (p. ix).

If professions can be said to have lost control over the criteria of professionalism, then there is, indeed, nothing special with them. Consequently, there can be no “third logic” in the spirit of Freidson (2001).

From my vantage point, there is a danger in developing a research focus on professionalism apart from an idea of self regulating profession. The idea of a “third logic” is in my mind impossible to divorce from some of the ideals of Parsons (1954), that professions are special, have a beneficial function to society, are self regulating and do indeed hold some power.

An additional problem with the current focus on professionalism is that the concept really is applicable to all occupations. I will in the current text articulate the idea that it is possible to talk about professions as a distinct kind of occupation. However, I do not think it reasonable to extend that kind of logic to claim that only professions can aspire to professionalism. Essentially, the theory of professions and the theory of professionalism are two different tracks. Professions cannot be said to have monopoly on professionalism and therefore research on professionalism is a much

larger research area. It would seem to be possible to study professionalism among non-professions as well as professions.

Building on such an understanding, I will use other concepts in order to describe processes to improve the quality of work within professions. The concept “quality” has in the current text been found to be most useful. Nevertheless, in the future we need to develop other concepts in order to better describe the way that professionals interact with professional organisations and with Academy, this being the core of what sets professions apart from other occupations.

2. Four stages in the development of theory of professions

Introduction

IN THIS CHAPTER I will in more detail review the three earlier stages of theory of professions. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion on the need for a stage four theory of professions.

Although it has been common to talk about “the sociology of professions”, the field is no longer monopolised by sociology. I therefore prefer to talk about “research on professions” to signal that it is interdisciplinary. In addition, by talking in terms of four stages of theoretical development, I’m actually in part involved with a radical re-reading of earlier research. I have little interest in historical accounts of the development of various professions, it is the generated theoretical ideas that I want to collect as resources.

Stage 1: profession (1930–1970)

Professions can, in many cases, be seen as derived from the mediaeval guild system. However, it wasn’t until the 19th century that they took the form similar to what we have today with the formation of the lower branch of the legal profession, architects, accountants and so on (Abbott, 1988). In the fourth volume of *Capital*, Marx (1976) discussed professional classes as having a negative contribution to surplus value. In his book *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1957), Durkheim argued that professional organisations served as a precondition of consensus in industrial societies, producing a better functioning society. Already here, professions were seen as organised bodies of experts that applied knowledge that had been given them through formal training. An important part of the organisation was that it in part was held together by a code of ethics. This theme is further developed in Carr-Saunders & Wilson (1933) which discussed 30 occupations that had a kind of commonality in the way they were organised and

built on research-based knowledge. Included is also a clear articulation of the idea of professions as having a stabilising influence on society. Together with family, church and university, great professions “stand like rocks against which the waves raised by these forces beat in vain.” (p. 497) This kind of perspective was further extended by Marshall (1939) who argued that professions served as a shield against threats to democratic processes.

The most influential researcher on professions was eventually to be Talcott Parsons (1954) who argued that professions were characterised by certain criteria such as: emotional neutrality, a symmetrical relationship toward clients, loyalty among the professional group, specialised on certain issues and attaining status for performance and not from heritage. Professions worked for the common good by distinguishing themselves as a collective and by not being self-serving. Parsons, probably the world’s most influential sociologist at that time, viewed professions as part of a larger theoretical perspective in which different institutions held different functions. Max Weber and his view of power as a central driver in society also heavily influenced Parsons. This is actually one of the most central ideas for understanding the development of professional theory. Parsons saw professions as wielding this power for the good of society. However, as we shall see, many of the critics of functionalism and the theory of professions would also build their perspective on Weber, but wielding a negative interpretation of the way power was distributed in society. Parsons, however, saw the function of professions as being the foremost bearers of rational values and the type of knowledge that would serve as economic drivers, all for the common good. The professions were therefore seen as key institutions for the modernisation of society.

Kornhauser (1965) connected these kinds of ideas to a negative interpretation of bureaucracy. Professions were seen as a rival form of social relationship, authority and control, challenging bureaucratic standards.

As this idealised image of professions caught on, it also became of vital importance to clearly identify which occupations really were professions. Ernest Greenwood (1957; 1966) introduced some slightly different and very influential criteria for professions:

- A systematic body of knowledge
- Professional authority and credibility
- Regulation and control of members
- A professional code of ethics
- A culture of values, norms, and symbols

These criteria clearly outlined normative standards for professions and representatives of occupations that strived for the status of profession. What happened next supplies an interesting example of the way in which sociology can, quite unintentionally, transform a phenomenon that it studies. Sociologists had simply slipped from their role of studying and observing an institution in society, to supplying norms for societal actors. Greenwood (1957) presented his criteria with caution, stating that differences between various occupations were quantitative and not qualitative. In other words, there was a sliding scale between different occupations, rather than a clear-cut line between professions and non-professions. However, this kind of reasoning tended to signal to ambitious professions that it was possible to strengthen already existing features in order to be qualified as professions.

The theory of semi-professions

In the 1960s, a number of new professions linked to the development of the welfare state as well as some old ones worked with these criteria. Sociology responded by taking a further normative step by interpreting the societal role of the criteria to be that of the gatekeeper rather than guidelines. The vagueness implied by Greenwood's discussion was handled by introducing a totally new notion, semi-professions, a concept used "without any derogatory implications" (Etzioni, 1969, p. v). This also created an uncomfortable distinction between, typically, male dominated fully-fledged professions in the private sector and female dominated semi-professions in the public sector such as teachers, nurses and social workers. Researchers such as Goode (1969) and Simpson & Simpson (1969) explicitly argued that women to a higher degree than men will accept a bureaucratic system of control and be less prone to develop professional standards.

Goode (1969) divided occupations in three groups: those who have become professions, those who will become and those who will not become. He noted that occupations such as dentistry, certified public accounting, clinical psychology and others had reached professional status within the last generation and similarly predicted that over the next generation we would find occupations such as social work and perhaps city planning become professions. Occupations such as librarians and schoolteachers were predicted not to become professions.

The main problem with semi-professions, argued Simpson & Simpson (1969) was that their knowledge was mostly developed from other disciplines. This kind of reasoning also highlights the ideal of autonomous ex-

pertise. By virtue of the intimate connection between a distinct academic discipline and the profession, it is possible to lay claim to having control over a specialised area of knowledge and the freedom to articulate opinions in that area. Semi-professions, it was argued, lacked autonomous expertise. Since this became such an important dimension on the discussion of semi-professions, it is vital to point out that Eraut (1994) found that members from well established professions actually, may lack this kind of autonomy as well. In addition, Krause (1996) found an erosion of professional autonomy being a dramatic trend (although it was culturally very varied).

The analyses made by Simpson & Simpson (1969) are very interesting as they identify some very interesting features in a number of occupations striving for professional status. However, since these features are connected to an inferior position in a hierarchical system, these qualities become tainted and implicitly evaluated as less valuable. Simpson & Simpson (1969) argued that the semi-professional knowledge in a distinct qualitative fashion is different from the rational knowledge of the professions. Semi-professions favour knowledge that is holistic, relativistic, subjective, dependent on context and theoretically weak. Quite clearly, this distinction between professions and semi-professions mirrors the distinctions at the time between the natural sciences, and the humanities/social sciences within academia. The breakthrough of qualitative methods in the 1970s within the social sciences can, in part, be seen to be a consequence of occupations marked as semi-professions seeking research support within the social sciences. Such efforts also served to strengthen the hierarchical system as a distinction was drawn against occupations with even less status (Parkin, 1979).

Stage 2: professionalisation (1960–1980)

As professional status was an end state desired by many occupations, professionalisation became an important research topic of its own in the 1960s (Abbott, 1988). Ironically, this came at a time when the functionalist paradigm was being re-evaluated. Freidson (1970) and Berlant (1975) were both representatives of the sociological symbolic interactionistic tradition that had always resisted functionalism and increasingly they started to take over the sociology of professions. They argued that professions were not about service but rather about dominance. Johnson (1972), building on a Marxist tradition, identified two broad types in models of professions: “trait” and “functionalist”. The former listed traits, attributes, of professional occu-

pations while the latter saw professions as containing elements with functional relevance for society. Johnson saw both approaches as inadequate for understanding occupational change. Instead he discussed how occupational specialisation created a degree of social distance between producers and consumers and that the various forms of control associated with professions were in decline. As Abbott (1988) has shown, this first round of criticism against the functionalist paradigm could only in part point to a new direction. As these theorists focused on professionalisation as the relevant research area, they tended to take for granted many of the core ideals of the functionalist perspective.

While Freidson (1970) discussed the controlling aspects of professions, based on the case study of medicine, he still articulated criteria characterising high status professions: technical autonomy (over knowledge), control of education, freedom from competition/regulation and control over other occupations/clients.

The new perspective emphasised the process through which occupations developed into professions. This generated a number of theories on how professions develop, by Abbott (1988) divided in two categories: formal and substantive. Substantive theories can in turn be divided in four basic categories: functional, structural, monopolist and cultural.

In the functional school, as with Parsons, profession was a means to control the asymmetric expert-client relationship. In the structuralist version, proposed by writers such as Millerson (1964), Wilensky (1964) and Caplow (1954), the diversity of professions were seen as a sign of many occupations not having matured and finished their process of professionalisation. The monopoly perspective spoke about dominance, exclusion, control and authority. Here we find researchers such as Larson (1977) and Freidson (1970).

Finally, the cultural school, represented by Bledstein (1976) and Haskell (1984), shows an interest in professions as holders of expertise and emphasised the cultural authority of professions. This would make cultural legitimation into a central process in the development of professions.

Abbott (1988) maintained that, despite the diversity of perspectives, they could be synthesised into a rather general concept of professionalisation, which he described in the following way:

Expert, white-collar occupations evolve towards a particular structural and cultural form of occupational control. The structural form is called profession and consists of a series of organizations for association, for

control, and for work. (In its strong form, the professionalization concept argues that these organizations develop in a certain order.) Culturally, professions legitimate their control by attaching their expertise to values with general cultural legitimacy, increasingly the values of rationality, efficiency and science. (Abbott, 1988, p. 16)

Abbott also tested 130 American and British professions on the argument that events followed a certain order. Building on earlier research, he suggested eight stages:

1. First (national) professional association
 2. First governmentally sponsored licensing legislation
 3. First professional examinations
 4. First professional school separate from some other profession
 5. First university-based professional education
 6. First ethics code
 7. First National-level journal
 8. First aggregation of schools (U. S.) or certification by association (England)
- (Abbott, 1988, p. 16)

Abbott found that this pattern was discernible in American free and subordinate professions, but not at all for the British professions studied. Analysing these results, Abbott noted that ideas of a natural evolution of professions relied on assumptions that change only evolved in one direction (toward the idealised form of professions) and that this movement is not dependent on contextual factors, such as relationship to competing professions and social/historical contexts. An additional problem with this kind of thinking was that professions were seen as homogeneous units and lack of homogeneity was interpreted as being in an immature stage in the development toward professional status. In short, these theories actually promoted a “one size fits all” idea of professional development that did not take into account what different professions really did and what kind of mandate they had. Instead, all emphasis was on the structure and expression of the organizational features.

Stage 3: social context (1980–?)

The new school of social context actually consists of several different theoretical threads, but they can broadly be characterised as “social contextual”.

As has been alluded to earlier, an alternate reading of Weber on power was important for several researchers in the re-evaluation of professional theory. According to such a conflict theory, social behaviour and social structure were explained by individual actors attempting to maximise wealth, power and status. Researchers such as Parry & Parry (1976), Larson (1977) and Collins (1990) worked with Weber’s conception of status groups, communities with a shared identity and ideals. Status groups were seen to be important for the division of labour, actually structuring the market. As occupational structures are in constant change, there is a persistent struggle to gain control over resources and gain privileges.

Even more important was the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism within sociology. This school of thought had, ever since the 1950s, dominated the neighbouring field of sociology of occupations (Macdonald, 1995). Increasingly, these researchers would move over and make an impact on sociology of professions (Hughes, 1958; Hughes, 1971; Freidson, 1970; Berlant, 1975; Freidson, 1983). They regarded professional titles and positions as constructed, claimed by certain occupations with the support of society. Professions were seen as no different from other occupations. The interesting research question was to find out how the label of profession was given to some occupations and not to others.

I would like to point out that there is a kind of predictability here. The epistemology that they promoted served their own cognitive and social interests. Coming from the sociology of occupations, the claim that professions were no different from other occupations would of course erase the field so that it could be swallowed by the sociology of occupations.

A Marxist approach was suggested by the works of Johnson (1972; 1977; 1980) which concerned itself with the relationship between producer and consumer of the professional services.

Still another important trend during the 1980s was the post-modern criticism of the grand narratives and of the modern project. Within sociology, one reaction against the grand narratives of macro-sociology was to turn to micro-sociology and recount a number of local stories. Talcott Parsons was a leading proponent for most of the old ideas and this is evident in the foundation he laid for functionalist professional theory. One could

argue that any research field closely tied to Parsons and grand narratives would suffer in the 1980s.

This is also a time when gender studies reach an academic breakthrough. From such a perspective, it is easy to see that professions dominated by men had served as role models and that those that were given the status of semi-professions were, largely, dominated by women (Witz, 1992).

A further important development in the re-evaluation of the old school, lay in the way that sociology lost its monopoly on discussing professions. In a way, this is a reflexive dimension of the breakdown of one of the basic ideas of the functionalist theory: monopoly in control over a specific knowledge area. The most visible disciplines, beside sociology, in the 1980s and 1990s, were pedagogy and history.

Burrage (1990) points out that research on professions up to the 1970s was an American and British affair. In addition, this research was ethnocentric, not concerned with whether or not they there really existed professions in other countries. According to Burrage (1990), it took another discipline, history, to start investigating professions in continental Europe. The entrance of history into this research field served to supply new ideas and contexts for sociologists, contributing to the transformation into a social contextual perspective. Burrage, a sociologist himself, reflects on how this forced sociologists to rethink their perspective:

First, they must take account of an ever-growing body of historical evidence. They must also abandon one of the more seductive delusions that sociology inherited from two of its founding fathers – namely, that one can write about institutions of one modern, capitalist society, about Britain, or France or the United States, as though it was typical, more or less, of all the rest. And since much of their earlier work has been neither historically or cross-culturally informed, they must also re-access their concepts, categories and strategies of investigation, as well as their theories and generalizations, to discover those which enable them to move freely over the much larger terrain that is now open to them. (Burrage, 1990, p. 20)

The most impressive historical contribution to the field at the time was probably *The Rise of Professional Society* by Harold Perkin (1988) which studied the phenomenon of “the professional society” in England from the 1880s. Perkin argued that a professional society was one in which professionals not only dominated society and became a new ruling class, but

also that the social value of professionalism permeated society in two ways. First, by forcing a professional hierarchical system onto society. Second, this emphasised human capital as well as differentiation of labour. Furthermore, the professional society also inspired the creation of a corporate state. As the British Empire started to decline in the 1970s, there also came a backlash against professional society. Perkin ties this into the rise of Thatcherism, the new right and the free market ideology.

In addition, it becomes quite popular for occupations to reflect on their identity in relationship to the ideals of professions and professionalisation.

The social contextual school criticises the old school view of a kind of beneficial “win-win” agreement between professions and society. According to the modern project, professions would serve to enlighten society and solve its most basic problems. Starting instead from the post-modern position, professions can be seen as self-serving institutions that jealously guard their positions, knowledge and power. Professions are seen to be a solution not to societal problems, but to conflicts between different social interests. Professions strive to attain the position of privilege and then to utilise it in order to maximise privileges.

From this vantage point, the role of academia is not to transfer knowledge, but rather to supply status and legitimation. Professions are thus respected for the knowledge that they are thought to have, not for the knowledge that they really have.

Making the case for stage four theories

Much of the stage two and three research has involved a kind of “battle of the cases”. Different researchers have studied various individual professions in a certain context and have allowed these observations to generate theory. As professions taken together constitute a very heterogeneous group of occupations, this has led to a wide variety of stories and theories. Either some have then struggled to give a privileged position to their account or they have tried to reconcile the differences by producing general theoretical statements on professionalisation and professionalism. Eventually, a number of attempts have been made to put together some kind of state of the art account on what professional work really is. The intention seems seldom to have been to communicate this state of the art to occupations and therefore produce a normative impact of some type. Still, I would maintain that such an impact is unavoidable. Essentially, profes-

sions are products of academia. This means that professionals are knowledge workers and as such they should be steadily working to improve the quality of their work (professionalism) and on their professional identity. As such, what academia has to say about professions will have an impact.

For instance, the popular textbook on *The Sociology of the Professions*, (Macdonald, 1995) heavily endorses “the professional project” developed by Larson (1977). The overall purpose of such a project is for professions to acquire a market monopoly for their services based on expertise. If students of various professions are taught this in class, they may take this with them in their future professional lives. I would forcefully argue that while the idea of a market monopoly has served an important function, it is dangerous to communicate as a normative principle for the future. As I will later discuss, modern professional life could benefit in quality if seen to be more about communication between different professionals than about the closing or monopolising of certain domains of knowledge and markets.

Contrary to the stage three research, stage four theories does not start with the empirical question “what are professions really like and how do they really work?” Rather, there is a point in asking: “what kind of professional work does society need?” Obviously, by posing such a question I, in a way, turn back to the tainted functionalistic perspective of Talcott Parsons, but I do so with a very different perspective. I do not attempt to take professions for granted as an unproblematic positive value for society. Instead, I am concerned with how to best should shape professions in order to optimise their positive value for society.

The social contextual stage can be said to be reflexive in the way that it opens up for more disciplines and perspectives. Sociologists, the dominating research group until then, can suddenly see new dimensions. They now produce the alternative stories that they could not discern earlier, and these are very good stories. However, the problem is that these stories are mostly focused as critical accounts of professions with the highest status. We are shown how they actually function in society, warts and all. Implicitly, researchers are then communicating to occupations with lesser status what the high status profession really should be.

In the fourth Stage that I suggest could follow, I will build on the idea that professions have many functions in society, some good, and some bad. Actually, it is difficult to say which is which. It is also important to realise that this is a research field that has a definite effect on the object of study. Therefore, it is not enough to be reflexive, rather to be meta-reflex-

ive and try to understand how we as researchers write stories about professions and with what societal effect.

My ambition is to produce something that can work as a guideline in society for professions and in the communication between Academy/professions. Stage four theories are formulated not to make the best possible account or the most realistic story, but rather something helpful in practice. Stage four theories thus presuppose a readership both inside and outside of academia. This is a very important point and it breaks with a very problematic tradition of researchers working with a distinction between professional theory and the professions themselves.

I argue that we need stage four theories of professions. The criticism aimed at the functionalist perspective has been massive. However, while social contextualist approaches have been very useful in understanding professions and power they have not been able to supply new norms for professions, professionalisation and professionalism. Actually, this has led us to an uncomfortable void. There are still entities in society that are called professions, but researchers with a constructive theoretical base are unable to further develop an understanding of them since they are no longer recognised as distinct entities. Also, perhaps even more important, research does not supply an updated set of criteria/ideals for other occupations to strive for. Paradoxically, this produces a kind of status quo, in which research becomes unable to help occupations become professions. The symbolic interactionist idea of the early 1970s of not making any distinction between “so-called” professions and other occupations (McKinlay, 1973, p. 65) has today become very popular in the field (Crompton, 1990; Hanlon, 1998; Evetts, 2003).

3. Eight problems and solutions

Introduction

IN THE FOLLOWING, I will attempt to summarise the basic problems identified in previous research that have led to a “theoretical dead end” within research on professions. Particularly, stage three research has given life to a negative image of professions. So many complications have been articulated that we are left with a research field with no character or identity. Even basic concepts such as profession and professionalisation are left useless. In articulating these difficulties and assigning them distinct labels, I am creating a resource for discussing the complex relationship between different problems.

Eight problems

One fundamental problem has been the evaluation of professions as either good or bad for society. The positive judgment is based on professions serving as instruments of rationality and modernisation. The negative judgment is based on professions being perceived as self-serving, striving for monopoly and social control. I will call this the *impact problem*.

The second problem that I will identify may perhaps appear minor or even laughable. However, I see it as a major problem that must be dealt with. I call it the *tainted problem* and it concerns the ideas connected to the functionalistic, integrated theory of professions that is mostly associated with Talcott Parsons. These ideas have been so criticised, that it seems no researcher dares to move into theoretical spaces that are close by. I find it unavoidable that a revival of a theory of professions occupies some theoretical spaces that have functionalist thought as a neighbour. Indeed, we need to discuss the function of professions, but from a different perspective.

The third fundamental problem concerns monopoly and competition.

A common theme in stage three research has been to see professions as struggling for a privileged position in competition with other professions or would-be professions. I call this the *competition problem*.

A fourth problem concerns privileges and status. Professionals are seen as both striving for and attaining privileges of some kind. Why should some occupations be valued higher than others? I call this the *status problem*.

The fifth problem attaches to another dimension of monopoly. Professionals become schooled in a certain paradigm in their academic education. Their handling of societal issues as expert of some kind is marked by this paradigm, something that has both positive and negative effects. A positive effect is that it becomes easy to work symmetrically, applying the same perspective on different cases and producing congruent analyses. On the negative side, professionals can become blind to other perspectives and will see them as being backed up by inferior perspectives. This is certainly one of most difficult and urgent problems to deal with. I call it the *paradigm problem*.

A sixth problem connected to the impact problem relates to power and control. Common for all three stages of research is that professions are perceived to be powerful and controlling. Researchers have differed over time on how they evaluate the usage of this power. However, more recently, some researchers have discussed the decline in power and autonomy of professions. Indeed, new public management has in some cases effectively used the criteria of professionalism to control professions. There is an exciting tension here that I call the *power problem*.

The seventh problem, concerns the diversity of professions. This is the basic problem for what I've called "the battle of the cases". Essentially, a researcher can find empirical support for any kind of sociological theory by choosing an adequate profession, culture or historical setting. This diversity, which has been so troubling for researchers, can be called the *heterogeneous problem*.

The eighth problem, finally, is conceptual. Researchers have moved from "profession" to "professionalisation" to "professionalism" and found them all wanting. The conceptual problem obviously needs an easy and sustainable solution, which I will attempt to supply in the next section. Following this, I will discuss a fourth stage solution to the other seven problems.

The conceptual problem

A specific dimension of stage three research was the recognition of the way that professions had actually developed in very different ways in different national contexts. Collins (1990) argued that Anglo American professionals usually were self-employed and, therefore, able to control their working conditions. European professionals were instead elite administrators, often working in the public sector. Krause (1996) showed that the European professionals with time had become such a heterogeneous group that classification was problematic.

This cultural diversity, once recognised, has fit well with the long-standing claims of the symbolic interactionist school, which has always seen professions as just any other occupation. Everett Hughes, the dominating figure within the sociology of occupations, set the tone in the early 1970s and many disciples would follow: “We need to rid ourselves of any concepts which keep us from seeing that the essential problems of men at work are the same whether they do their work in the laboratories of some famous institution or in the messiest vat room of a pickle factory” (Hughes, 1971, p. 417).

I would argue that this normative statement functions well as a methodological guideline in a certain strand of research. In other words, it is interesting and fruitful to perform research from such a perspective. However, as an epistemological doctrine it becomes highly problematic. It simply postulates a certain reality in a paradigmatic way and that makes researchers blind for any differences and variations that would come forth in empirical studies.

While stage three research had little interest in defining professions, many of them still felt the need to make some kind of general remark on them. These definitions are interesting in the way that they actually tend to point a finger at widely different targets. This is a reflection of the different national traditions, but also of the great heterogeneity within the group of occupations generally termed professions. It also links into the problem of some occupational groups still striving for professional status and attempting to develop definitions that would work well with what they already were doing.

Freidson (1983) continued to highlight control and talked about occupational control of work, a kind of definition that would direct us toward those kinds of occupations that have that kind of control. This is in line with Freidson’s inclination to prefer to talk about occupations rather than

professions, while retaining a position as an authority on professionalisation and professionalism. In Freidson (2001) he is a little bolder saying: “The concept of profession tends to keep us from seeing those with that label as workers. It does properly signal that they have a special position in the political economy which truly distinguishes them and the problems they have at work from those in other occupations” (Freidson, 2001, p. 13). Still, he uses it with regret, since it mystifies the real issues and similarities with other occupations.

Crompton (1990) preferred instead to talk about *occupations of expert labour*. This would make us focus on the expert function, which also relates to issues of legitimacy and connection with academia.

Abbott (1988) is focused on *the system of professions*, which emphasises the relationship between different occupations and the powerplay involved in various clusters.

Naturally, this kind of lack of a congruent view of what the profession really is, would essentially serve to undermine the research field of sociology of professions or professional studies. How can researchers generate and exchange knowledge if they are not talking about the same thing?

In addition, since researchers have blacklisted the practice of defining the concept, they have also robbed themselves of the possibility of discussing these variations and coming up with a simple solution that would satisfy most of them.

From my perspective, another basic problem with the definitions is that researchers have been reflecting an individual set of empirical work (their own). Consequently, definitions have given the concept a specific meaning, creating a boundary between different types of occupations. Paradoxically, this effect is really what many researchers attempted to avoid.

Note for instance the way that Evetts (2003) tries to define professions in the following by giving into the “Battle of the cases”:

Professions are essentially the knowledge-based category of occupations which usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience. A different way of categorising these occupations is to see professions as the structural occupational and institutional arrangements for dealing with work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies. Professionals are extensively engaged in dealing with risk, with risk assessment and, for the use of expert knowledge, enabling customers and clients to deal with uncertainty. (Evetts (2003, p. 397)

In this definition, we are first given what I believe is an important part of a viable definition of professions, namely that they are produced through an academic education, which I must add should be at least three years, followed by vocational training. I would also want to add the existence of a professional organisation that sets standards for the vocational training. However, Evetts (2003) quickly leaves this simple definition in order to signal a preference for some types of professions, those that have an expert status, those that deal with risks/uncertainties and those that have clients. This is a favouring of the way that Crompton (1990) defines professions, thus reflecting certain empirical work on some professions. In this way, a clear boundary is created between different types of occupations.

Let me then restate the alternative that I find viable as a definition for stage four theories. There are some similarities with the six criteria outlined by Burrage et al (1990), but my suggestion emphasis simplicity. I will allow three criteria:

- At least three year academic education program
- Lifelong vocational training
- Professional association

With the exception of vocational training, I think these are clear and actually self-explanatory. Vocational training is a bit trickier. Obviously, there is an informal or formal element of vocational training in all occupations. What sets the professions apart is that this is a never-ending process. If you acquire a set of skills in an educational programme and simply spend your working life applying these, then I would not place this occupation in the category of professions. Nor would I say that about an occupation in which you spent five years learning the craft of an occupation and that is it. A possible counter argument against this kind of distinction is that many occupations today are involved in complex social settings in which it becomes impossible for them to repeat the same kind of skills year after year. My response is, fine, then I would suggest that such occupations initiate a process of professionalisation. If your occupation is in constant transition, then you would need research based intellectual support and reflection in order to cope with this constant transition.

I do not see it as viable for academia only to graduate students and then never see them again. For best quality, there need to be a continuous relation between the profession and academia in which the latter continu-

ously can learn more about the profession it educates for and can serve as a continuous support in the task of lifelong learning for professionals. Implicitly, this emphasis on the role of education defines professionals as knowledge workers in a very general sense.

There are several advantages to this definition.

First, it creates a clear boundary against what is not a profession. This makes it easier for researchers to talk about this phenomenon.

Second, it is exclusive in a fair way. It excludes on the relevant points not based on tradition, type of work or status.

Third, by broadening I am no longer talking about only privileged elites. I am also including social workers, nurses, teachers and librarians, etc, much of the infected discussion on professions and their status, privileges and power becomes much less relevant. The critical academic discussion on certain occupations with a very high status, salary and other types of privileges is a much smaller research area. There is an overlap with research on professions, but it creates confusion if these two research fields totally collapse into each other. Certainly many privileged groups such as business leaders and politicians come from all lifestyles and are active outside the professional system.

Fourth, it creates clear standards for what is a profession and it therefore becomes easy to formulate a strategy. Obviously, professional status is not for all occupations. The academic education is fundamental and it is designed for knowledge and information workers.

Fifth, these kinds of distinctions make it easier to deal with the concept of professionalisation and professionalism. Professionalisation is quite simply the process of establishing an academic education program, vocational training and the professional association. Professionalism is, on the other hand, a concept that applies to all kinds of occupations. It becomes possible to talk about professionalism within the professions, with awareness that there are discussions that are just as valid on professionalism within non-professions and that they are likely to be very different. Professionalism is, as I see it, always about localised standards for quality. Middlehurst & Kennie (1997) identified nine characteristics, features, values, attitudes and behaviours that were typical for the professionalism of professions. However, in my mind they can be summed up with three words: expertise, service and autonomy. In a well functioning system, the profession should always strive to be better experts and to improve in their service in communicating/transferring this expertise. Autonomy is needed for continual improvement of quality. This description captures professions, such as I

have defined them now. However, professionalism in other occupations will entertain other standards.

Sixth, it is a very simple and universal definition. Given the research on the cultural differences of professions, it seems reasonable to work with these very basic requirements, which, I maintain, are possible to apply in most cultural settings.

The heterogeneous problem

In the early days of research on professions, a few individual professions were studied and then these served as role models for what profession could and should be. In Stage two and, above all in Stage three research, it became obvious that a valid definition of profession was hard to put together.

An obvious strategy to counter the problem of defining such a heterogeneous phenomenon as professions would be to avoid talking about it as if it was a homogeneous phenomenon. Several researchers, therefore, have worked with typologies, describing different types of professions with somewhat different characteristics. This has sometimes been done in order to analyse the interaction between different professions as they interact with each other. Building on the connection between class and profession, already discussed by Marx and Weber, Brante (1990) associated different types of professions to different classes as a way to map the conflicts involved. He thus made a distinction between state professions, academic professions, capital professions and free professions.

Watkins, Drury & Preddy (1992) identify five professional groups in the UK:

- Pre-industrial, such as medicine and law.
- Industrial, such as engineers, chemists, accountants.
- Welfare state, such as teachers and social workers.
- Enterprise, such as business and management specialists.
- Knowledge workers, such as information, communication and media specialists

The authors also note that the distinctions between some of these are becoming blurred. This typology is interesting in many ways. The principle of categorisation is historical and therefore clearly shows how status has a connection to tradition. A profession that has been in business for centuries will have been able to establish a clear area of monopoly and status to

match. Watkins, Drury & Preddy (1992) speculate that as more occupations will be seen as professions, the title will be less exclusive and this in turn will make the element of power less of a problem.

Building on my discussion on the *conceptual problem*, I see all professions as consisting of knowledge workers. With this insight, it is possible to collapse the four first categories of the above typology into the fifth. There may still be a point to discuss the different circumstances surrounding a greater diversity of professions, but on the theoretical level that I am discussing stage four research, it is very useful to find a common denominator. Knowledge workers are very important for society and this makes it possible for us to discuss the *impact problem* from a new perspective.

The impact problem

Are professions good or bad for society? I find it remarkable that this has been an either-or issue in the development within the field. As professions from a sociological perspective have been associated with power, self-serving interests, monopolising knowledge, monopolising societal areas and an undeserved high status and control over non-professions, the view in recent decades has much too often been negative. However, this image is also marked by the dominance of sociology in reflecting on professions. As such, these kinds of reflections are very paradigmatic, i.e. these are, to a certain extent, standardised accounts that are similar to sociological accounts of other societal institutions. For instance, there are many similarities with the development of a constructivistic sociology of scientific knowledge within the sociology of science in the 1980s. A common sociological agenda at that time was to identify institutions of power and then to show how this position is based on certain historical and social constructions, thereby undermining the institution.

A sociological understanding of professions is very valuable, but it is also only one kind of perspective on the societal role of professions. I would argue that the interesting questions are not about powerful professions being good or bad for society, but instead on how to improve the impact that professions have on society. With a generous definition of the concept of profession, it is possible to recognise that there are professions in society underpinned by academic and vocational training as well as a professional association. Obviously, both society and the knowledge workers themselves have invested heavily in producing a competence that societal norms deem of great value. Professions should therefore have an impact on society.

What is best for society? I have one keyword for understanding this question and that is: quality. We want different societal processes, expert advice, health care, deliberations on risk, judicial system, financial system, information system, education etc to work as good as possible. In fact, we want the quality of these processes to be steadily increasing. In order for this to happen, we need to produce knowledgeable people in all sectors of society. We also need to give them a certain amount of power so that they can exercise their good judgment, so that this knowledge has an impact on society.

The tainted problem

By suggesting that professions provide a service (function) beneficial for society, we are of course entertaining ideas that are very similar to those articulated by Parsons (1954). However, I would argue that it is not the functionalistic discourse itself that were a problem in stage two and stage three research. I suggest that it was the *conceptual problem*, the *competition problem*, the *paradigm problem* and the *status problem* that caused the criticism. As I will apply a different perspective on these, I will radically change the basis for talking about professions as providing a beneficial function.

Actually, merely by shifting perspective on the *conceptual problem*, it is possible to remove the perspective from the functionalist ideas. Parsons had a narrow and elitist perspective on professions. By broadening the concept and allowing more occupations into the label, some of stage one ideas actually become more useful. Stage two theory with its emphasis on professionalisation seems less interesting, since I have already included all of the “semi-professional” occupations and also outlined clear criteria for other occupations that would want to come aboard. The interesting issue is not how to get there, but instead how to steadily increase quality for those that are there. Stage three, so concerned with power and exclusion, also becomes of less use. This becomes even clearer as I address the status problem.

The status problem

There are two dimensions to the status problem. First, professions have a higher status, including certain privileges, than other occupations. Second, there is an uneven distribution of status within the category of profession.

On the first issue, I find it quite reasonable that a lengthy education leads to an occupation with certain privileges. With an emphasis on the tainted functionalist idea that professions perform a valuable societal function, it should become easier to inspire young people to find it attractive and inspiring to enter a lengthy educational programme. It is not good for society if there are no rewards involved in acquiring professional expertise.

The second issue is more of a real problem. As I now have broadened the definition of “profession”, it is more evident than ever that there is a great variety in the status of different professions. However, from a research perspective, it is important to ask how research on professions and academia at large should relate to this issue. As I see it, academia has a certain responsibility in setting and steadily raising the quality of their educational programs and thereafter give signals to society that students coming out of their educational programs have acquired a valuable competence. In the end, it is up to the societal actors and professional associations to negotiate markers of status.

I would argue that none of the earlier three research stages have helped society and professional associations to deal with this issue. Once again, researchers have been unable to respond to the very real impact that theories on professions have had on professions themselves. Stage one clearly worked to solidify a narrow group of elite professions. Stage two did not improve on the situation with its emphasis on “semi-professions” and professionalisation processes. The implication was that some occupations had not matured enough yet. They should therefore not be allowed full privileges. Stage three had an effect of weakening professional status overall. As I see this, the practical consequence was minor for the strong and established professions that did not need experts on professions telling them that they were important and valuable since their monopoly was so established that it was unshakable. Instead, it became a problem for the weaker professional groups. With this new line of research, they were bereft of any kind of research support for their strategic work. They wanted to acquire a higher status and the rules of the game had been to initiate a process of professionalisation that served to increase professionalism in order to become recognised as professions. However, stage three research avoided to define any of these conceptual instruments and, furthermore, supplied a negative view of professionalisation as a self-serving hunt for higher privileges. This actually left weaker professions without any tools and support from research in their quest for a higher status.

A major difficulty for stage three research was that by avoiding to define the concept of profession, they failed to recognise the difference between the two dimensions outlined above. The paradoxical societal result, in my view, became a systematic favouring of the high status groups that they have focused on and criticised. Implicitly, this sent a message that this is what the profession is and by recognising their status and power, research has contributed to idealised images of professions.

In the meantime, according to some accounts, professions in the real world have suffered. In a monumental study Krause (1996) studied four professions in five countries (Britain, France, Germany, Italy and United States) concluding that state regulation and capitalism had deprived professions control over their workplaces, markets and training of their successors. Krause suggested that professions were either dead or dying. Broadbent, Dietrich & Roberts (1997) echoed that sentiment in their book *The End of the Professions?*, an interdisciplinary attempt to understand how and why professionalism was changing. Nixon (1997) notes that working as a university teacher no longer automatically leads to autonomy and status. Perkin (1989) talks about an anti-professional backlash of our time and professionals have brought it on themselves due to their arrogance.

From my perspective, it is possible to suggest a connection between researchers on professions becoming increasingly critical to the notion of professions and professionals having difficulty in defending themselves against a devaluation of their status. When Marquand (1997), building on Perkin (1989), describes how the New Right in the UK has devaluated professions, his description of the professional unfriendly perspective is, in my view, remarkably congruent with stage three research.

How can stage four research work with the issue of status? The most important thing is to acknowledge the broad and very general definition of the concept given above. It is not our job to signal that some professions are worth more than others (second dimension) only to signal the quality of lengthy academic programs in general (first dimension). Instead, theory of professions should be concerned with the structures within academia and those connecting academia, professions, professional associations and other societal actors. This brings us into the *paradigm problem* and the *competition problem*.

The paradigm problem

The paradigm problem is a major difficulty that needs to be addressed in science and education policy. I would argue that the old model with disciplines monopolising professions is deeply problematic. For traditionally strong disciplines, such monopolies have often been translated to professions with so-called “market shelters” (Freidson, 1994; Timmermans, 2008). Professions are not well served by a process in which students are constantly fed the same perspective in a lengthy professional education program. Not only do students miss other relevant perspectives, there is also a real risk of them becoming blind to other perspectives. Professions need flexible students, which are able to alternate between different perspectives, and are able to connect to the other perspectives of the people they meet as professionals.

The idea of a tight connection between a discipline and a set of disciplines, such as in medicine and law, originated in another time in which research was organised in a different way than today. Research during most of the 20th century was dominated by strong disciplines and there is a clear description of them in Kuhn’s seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Disciplines are governed by a core set of ideas that he called paradigms. The paradigm is successful in solving problems and it is sustained by research that is continuously building more theories on to it and giving it more and more explanatory power. The paradigm is taught to all new researchers, but also to students, including those that will become future professionals. There is much to learn from these analyses, including the familiar phenomenon of a “scientific revolution”, which entails a new paradigm. For our purposes, it is interesting to understand that a change of paradigm creates disconnect between current research and established professionals, the latter having been schooled in the old paradigm many years earlier.

Fortunately, disciplines do not really look like that any more. The strong disciplines that Kuhn described were autonomous and distant from society. They also established very clear boundaries against each other, creating a division of labour and a kind of monopoly. This system, in turn, was reproduced in the development of professional systems. Today, the lines between disciplines are less clear and interdisciplinary collaboration is common.

In the 1990s, Funtowicz & Ravetz (1993) attempted to update the theory of paradigms in order to deal with the need for more quality in knowl-

edge production. Their starting point was what they called the Ch-Ch syndrome, which referred to the failure of enforcing viable standards of quality in significant catastrophic events such as with the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown and the Challenger shuttle crash. The problem, they reasoned, was that people with restricted knowledge handled the quality control of very advanced technologies. It would be possible to see the failure at Chernobyl and with the Challenger shuttle as coincidences, but Funtowicz & Ravetz saw a failure in the way research and production of knowledge is organised.

Funtowicz & Ravetz introduced the concept of post-normal science that would be more adapted for modern risk society than the old normal science that was associated with a single paradigm. Normal science was based on an atomistic ideal, solving individual problems with individual pieces of knowledge. Such thinking has difficulties seeing the larger picture including a problem of being locked into short-term goals.

Funtowicz & Ravetz argued that the most urgent problems of society today could not be handled with that kind of knowledge production. Modern problems were often characterised by extensive uncertainties, strong external pressure from many interest groups and a need for interdisciplinary research.

In brief, normal research was governed by the paradigm within the discipline. Research was well demarcated and specialised and complications were avoided. The paradigm had to be defended at all costs and therefore anomalies that did not fit the paradigm were “swept under the rug”. Researchers felt most at home in basic research and without too much contact from external actors.

In contrast, post-normal research developed under extensive pressure including interaction with external actors. Research was interdisciplinary since the problems involved were too difficult for an individual discipline to handle alone. In practice, the boundaries became so fluent that there were no dominating paradigms. Research was not specialised in the same way as earlier, since it was important to see the big picture.

Important for post-normal science was the idea of extended peer review. In order to ensure the quality of the knowledge produced, researchers should break with the traditional peer review in which other researchers from the same discipline and with the same perspective evaluated your research. Instead, it was important that knowledge produced would be commented on from a variety of different perspectives both inside and outside of science.

Funtowicz & Ravetz explicitly discuss what they call “professional consultancy” that is caught up in the middle between applied science and post-normal science. Traditionally, professionals have relied on applied science, which is an area in which the rules of normal science still function. Here, systematic uncertainties can be neglected since the stakes and cost of error are low. This makes it problematic for professionals to rely on them, since in their work; the stakes are often higher with a distinct price for error. However, on the other side, they are surrounded by post-normal science where the stakes are even higher and facts more uncertain.

Funtowicz & Ravetz produced a valuable normative role model that also was shown to be more or less in play already in the 1990s concerning global environmental issues such as stratospheric ozone depletion (Nolin, 1995) and climate change (Bray & von Storch, 1999).

The ideal of post-normal science can also serve as a valuable normative ideal for the way academia should produce educational programs for professions. Other researchers have supplied a similar discussion on the old and new forms of organising research, most notably, the Mode one and Mode two distinction (Gibbons, et. al., 1994). However, for the purpose of this paper, the articulation of post-normal science is enough to articulate an ideal in which educational programmes for professionals are much less based on a single discipline alone and for an emphasis on the importance of interaction between researchers and professionals in a relationship that both parties can find beneficial.

It is also possible, with these ideas, to appreciate the new trend of a more intimate connection and collaboration between academia and professions. In part, this is a reaction to a perceived crisis in the relationship between academic education and the labour market. Frequently, graduated students find that many years of academic schooling have not led to easy employability, since the labour market cherishes other values and skills. One strategy to counter this tendency has been to increase the dialogue between academia and members of the profession. An interesting trend has also been the development of professional universities, including professional doctorates.

An idea that has appeared in the context of professional universities has also been to extend the collaboration into research itself. In this way, there could be established a collaborative effort in researching the problems of professions in which members of the profession play an important role in giving feedback as the project proceeds. The concept of integrated design

(Brorström, 2007) has been suggested as an instrument to describe how the design of a research project reflects the interest of both researchers and professionals.

While there is certainly a lot going on which serves to undermine the paradigm problem, there is still a long way to go. Stage four theories of professions can contribute by analysing and discussing the way in which educational programs can be opened up and the way in which the collaboration between academia and professionals can be intensified.

The competition problem

Essentially, much of what has been said about the paradigm problem, which concerns the traditional monopolised role of disciplines, is just as relevant for a discussion on the competition problem. The societal monopoly of professions, so criticised in stage three research, is a genuine and serious societal problem. It is the major contribution of stage three research of analysing this and advancing knowledge on what I call the competition problem.

However, professions are also changing and becoming more open. The construction of global professions (Fourcade, 2006) can lead to powerful professions establishing transnational standards of market shelters. However, since professions have taken so many different forms in various countries (Krause, 1996), it may also lead to new openings as different local practices are confronted with each other. Stage four theories needs to stimulate such a process in order to transform competition to collaboration. Much of this is already being done, but once again, I believe that existing research on professions has served as a confounder and as best a neutral effect on this development.

As academia has post-normal science, we should look toward the development of “post-normal professions” in society. Increasingly, professionals deal with complex issues that require collaboration between several kinds of professions. Given support from research on professions and new theoretical development, professionals should increasingly realise that “the market shelter is a mixed blessing for professionals” (Timmermans, 2008, p. 181). What we are looking for is the mirror images of the extended peer review within research work, having professionals increase the quality of their knowledge and competence by collaborating with other experts. Quite often, professionals work together in teams where each member carries a specific professional identity. I see this as a fruitful development

and improvement on the old model that works with an ideal of the professional going one-on-one with the client.

A useful theoretical resource for this kind of discussion is “communities of practice” (Wenger, 2006), a concept very influential within pedagogy. Communities of practice reflect the informal learning that takes place outside of the academic education. As the former student comes into an occupation, she also comes into a learning situation. Although the formal education has supplied a series of competences, there are still a number of skills, some of them tacit that can only be acquired through the learning process in the group. Characteristic of the informal learning situations within a community of practice is that they are authentic, and it is argued that such contexts in which real problems are dealt with in real situations in real-time provide the best processes of learning. People will organise themselves in informal “communities of practice” within which they exchange knowledge in shared enterprises over time. Wenger also characterised these as shared histories of learning and with time, this creates a common identity, but also a boundary against those who have not been participating.

Communities of practice exist closely connected with other communities of practice and their members move more or less fluently between them. For the professional, a group can be either heterogeneous or homogeneous when it comes to professional identity. In a heterogeneous community of practice, the learning is extremely complex, since it consists of a team with different professional identities. The learning is less dramatic in a homogeneous community of practice, if for instance the group only consists of lawyers. However, even members of such groups will find themselves going in and out of collaborations with members from other professional groups. Wenger (2006) uses the example of claims processing, usually considered a rather narrow and well-isolated practice. However:

It involves, among others, claims technicians, underwriters, system designers, and various levels of management... beyond the company, there are other claims processors, patients, benefit representatives, accounting clerks, and a variety of medical and legal professionals. Newcomers to claims processing quickly become initiated to this set of relations. Joining a community of practice involves entering not only its internal configurations but also its relations with the rest of the world (Wenger, 2006, p. 103).

When members from different communities of practice interact, there occurs a “boundary encounter”. This can take many forms such as a visit, a telephone conversation, a meeting or an informal coffee conversation. Wenger identifies three distinct boundary encounters:

- One-on-one: both members are momentarily outside their respective communities of practice and can freely negotiate meanings.
- Immersion: typically a visit into an existing community of practice.
- Delegations: a number of residents from each community become involved in a negotiation of meaning.

The mixing of different professions in various practical settings requires professionals to be more flexible and to broaden their horizons. Now more than ever, it seems that professionals need this kind of broad base for professional practice. While certainly an interesting dimension of competition among professions can be found, I would argue that the dimension of collaboration is much more important. Sociological research has tended to view professions as isolated communities of practice, with competition being the sole interesting relation between different professions. By emphasising collaboration and the way that professional communities of practice interact in order to get their job done, we reach a much more interesting understanding of what professional work really is. It is this kind of understanding that can feed back into the practical work of supporting qualitative development of professions.

The power problem

While the theory of communities of practice supplies a valuable resource for understanding how professional work has become more complicated in a way that mirrors the tendencies described in the discussion on post-normal science, professional knowledge has also become more contested by clients. An important trend in society has been the introduction of new information and communication technologies that have severely undermined pockets of professional monopoly. Clients have become increasingly knowledgeable and have been able to interact with professionals on a more even level. This tends to give consumers more power in relation to the professions. One aspect of this is that new information technologies have opened up and given access to what earlier was exclusive profession-

al knowledge. This is a tendency predicted by Collins (1990) who spoke about the future serious crisis for the professions by virtue of a loss of authority, credibility and monopoly.

This loss of power is actually a new dimension to the familiar power problem. Traditionally, professions are seen as powerful and many sociologists are schooled to criticise what is seen as powerful. Abbott (1988, p. 1) posed the question: "Why should there be occupational groups controlling the acquisition and application of various kinds of knowledge?". Stage one professional theory observed favourably the intimate connection between academy and professions in which the latter was given a cognitive and social monopoly on certain areas of knowledge. The social contextual school of thought clearly had a point in arguing that professions were given unreasonable power over other social groups by virtue of this monopoly.

Stage four theories are not about monopoly. If we want to raise the quality of every area in society, we need to have each one of them supported by qualified professionals that are specialised in that area. In order for them to be able to contribute, they must be allowed to have an impact, which can be seen as a wielding some kind of power. However, if research can supply normative guidelines on the collaboration within academia and between academia and professions, in other words extended peer review, then this is a power that is built on a quality process. The execution of power then follows on a deliberation among different actors that takes into account very different perspectives and interests. You cannot delete power from professions, but one should strive for producing the best kind of knowledge and competence to underpin the execution of that power. Quality is assured through flexibility and this makes the negative aspects of power less of an issue. Academia should be flexible and allow for several different perspectives in the educational programme, since this quite simply raises the quality of the programme. Academia should also be flexible in its negotiation with professions and incorporate skills deemed valuable not only from an academic perspective, but from a professional as well. The aim is to graduate students that are flexible enough to listen to and learn from clients as well as other professions.

As I see it, the societal areas of monopoly are in decline, but this does not lead into a decline of the professions, quite the contrary. As societal areas are opened up to each other, they become even more complex. This puts even higher demands on professions that not only can be experts on a specific area, but also maintain a working knowledge on neighbouring areas and are able to interact with other kinds of experts.

4. Articulating the basic tenets of stage four theory of professions

Introduction

IN THE FOLLOWING, I will pull together the gist of my argument in order to outline the main characteristics of stage four theory of professions. In order to move from the power approach of stage three research, there is a need to perform six perceptual shifts.

From critical analyses to improvement of practice

Stage four theory is about shifting focus from describing and analysing the role of professions to actively contributing to their improvement. Instead of the critical and distanced approach of stage three research, a fruitful starting point would be to collaborate with professionals, to produce theoretical instruments that help them in their practice. Certainly, the analytical strategy of studying the phenomenon from a distance has its place, but researchers need to alternate perspectives in order to not only analyse, but also support professions. My position is that we as members of the research community really do not have that kind of critical distance to professions. The Academy and professions are tightly interlinked and the systematic mistakes that they make in their practice reflect our flaws as a community of researchers. We are really much better situated as researchers to change professions than to study them from a distance.

From sociologists to researchers that educate professionals

It is reasonable to assume that the development of this field should actually not be in the hands of sociologists, contributing to a generalised conception of how occupations function in society. Rather, research on professions, including the production of theory, should increasingly be performed in connection with disciplines that educate professionals. As

such, researchers are already part of the process in their interaction with associations and in their roles as teachers. In this context, researchers and professionals need support in the form of theoretical instruments to articulate and develop their different roles.

From an understanding of the power problem to acting on the power problem

Much of the criticism from the power approach of stage three stems from the perceived closed nature of successful professions and disciplines. There is much to learn from the power approach on this account. However, there is a fundamental reflexive dimension to this criticism. Sociology of professions has been the spokespersons of academy on this issue and it has been the organisation of academy that has produced monopolies of professional knowledge in society that simply mirrored the monopolies within academy. Therefore, the remedy can be found in the transformation of the academy, breaking down the monopolies at the root. Still, today, the main model of education is to allow professional programs to be monopolised by one discipline. Building on the insights from research on post-normal science and practical problems concerning the uncertainties that professionals have to deal with, this would seem to be an unreasonable model for the future. Theories can be developed in collaboration with different disciplines and as such work proceeds, educational practice can change in order to produce more open-minded professionals.

From understanding professions as monopolising to professions as collaborating

There is a great strength in the educational system. If Academy can give new signals in the form of a greater diversity of competencies to their students, increasingly this kind of openness can extend into society. In my discussion on the interaction between different communities of practice, I have argued that a stimulating exchange between professionals is already ongoing. It is an important task for stage four theory to produce new ideas and models that stimulate academy, professional associations and individual professionals to move away from traditional monopolies.

The most important signal of best practices that the academy can give is that quality is associated with openness toward other professions as well as a system of life long learning connected to the academy. In the old es-

sentimentalistic normative model, professions are evaluated based on the quality of the academic discipline that are educating the profession. Based on this, you either are in or out or perhaps labelled as a semi profession. Quality is connected to the closed, strong discipline, with a theoretical framework of its own. What I, instead, suggest is that quality can be linked to

one) a discipline being open (rather than closed) for several different perspectives that students need to become comfortable with in their schooling to becoming professionals.

Two) a profession and a professional association that is open and interlinked with other related professions. I use the discussion on “communities of practice” to discuss this dimension.

Three) a profession and professional association that continually strives for high-quality by a never-ending collaboration with Academy.

However, in order to articulate these ideas within professional theory there is a need to reinterpret some of the ideas within theory of professions, there is a need to reinterpret some of the ideas of functionalism relating to professions. There is also a need to address the power problem and the competition problem (collaborate as communities of practice instead of competing).

From cultural and occupational diversity as a theoretical problem to an asset

Professions can be very different in various national contexts. Furthermore, the status problem has introduced additional complexities into the task of comparing and classifying professions. With the kind of generous and inclusive definition than I have suggested in this text, it is possible to both recognise that it's fruitful to talk about a set of occupations as professions and analyse them without evaluating them as more or less worth in society. Professions are essentially involved in the intellectual maintenance and development of service to society and its members. As there is such a great variety of tasks which need to be performed through the standardised procedures and sophisticated judgements of the professions, different professions need to develop in many directions. The earlier tendency of establishing ideals, built on doctors and lawyers, has therefore in a sense been counter-productive, stimulating professions to imitate models that may not have been suited for them. Against this, I would suggest

an acceptance of the idea that different tasks require a diversity of professional forms.

The great diversity of different professional systems identified by Krause (1996) could lead us to conclude that it is not possible to do research on professions since it is much too heterogeneous a phenomenon. However, one could instead argue that every national system can be seen as an experiment, one way of solving the same problem. Each national system and each variation of the professional occupation is an asset enabling us to better understand the changing roles of professions in society.

From generalised theory to qualitative studies

My argument, to move away from generalised theory, may seem to be self contradictory since this text clearly is an example of, and indeed, a plea for generalised theory. However, localised and qualitative studies focused on the diversity of professions do still need some kind of theoretical frame and my text is a contribution to a revision of the power approach, which today functions as a frame. In other words, for every type of activity there is a need for a certain type of rules and right now, in my estimation, the rules are not working. They have to change in order for us to proceed.

The old rules are in part based on a problematic understanding of qualitative studies. I have earlier discussed what I call “the battle of the cases”, referring to the way that researchers have revised their understanding of professions based on a generalisation of individual case studies. The strength of such accounts, saying that “this is the way professions are”, implicitly builds on the old criteria set by Parsons (1954) and Greenwood (1957, 1966). Generalised accounts in this way supply a rather limited and homogeneous view of professions that has tended to exclude would-be professions.

In my discussion on the *conceptual problem*, I have outlined a general set of criteria that is intended to be very generous and inclusive. Beyond that kind of approximation, we have to allow great diversity. As this switch is made, studies of profession must be situated within modern conceptions of qualitative research. There is a huge and fascinating discussion on the pitfalls and varieties of qualitative research today, for instance summarised in Denzin & Lincoln (2000). An interesting point of departure for the theory of professions is the *trilateral concept of truth* suggested by Alvesson & Sköldbreg (2005). The point is that our traditional appreciation of truth as only relating to correspondence between theory and real-

ity, is too narrow. Instead, a *trilateral concept of truth* also allows for truth as understanding (the hermeneutical dimension) and use (the pragmatic dimension). Qualitative studies of individual professions will not allow us to produce generalised truths about all professions, but they can enable us to better understand professions and to improve the quality of the practice of professionals.

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RESEARCH ON PROFESSIONS

is a troubled field marked by a reluctance to define its main concept: profession. In this text it is argued that the field has developed dominating perspectives that are of little use for professions themselves in developing identity, collaboration with other professions and increasing quality. Through a discussion of the main problems of the theory of professions, new solutions are suggested, together with a set of guidelines for a theory of professions that would be of use for professions and would-be professions. A number of main positions from earlier research are reviewed. Eight problems are seen as creating the current theoretical “dead end”. The author discusses an integrated set of solutions to resolve these problems.



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