

Deprofessionalisation: Striking at the Heart of Professionalism.

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Abstract

In the contemporary political-economic context professionals are increasingly working as employees in organisations. This paper examines the meaning of professionalism and the values that professionals embrace. The paper argues that there is an inherent tension between organisational values and professional values and that compliance with organisational goals in preference to professional goals results in deprofessionalisation. Research into organisational-professional conflict indicates that job satisfaction and organisational commitment are reduced and organisational turnover is increased by organisational-professional conflict. The paper argues that organisational-professional conflict research needs to be expanded and refined to develop a clearer understanding of factors contributing to organisational turnover among professionals.

Key words: professional, professionalism, professional values, professional commitment, organisational-professional conflict, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, organisational turnover.

Introduction

Changes in the political-economic context of the last three decades that have resulted in the 'corporatisation' of the public sector and the increasing employment of professionals in the private sector means that there is a growing need to more clearly understand the needs of professional employees in the organisational context. This paper examines the meaning of professional and professionalism and the values that professionals advocate in the performance of their work. The paper argues that the political-economic changes of the last three decades, sometimes labelled as 'economic rationalism' amplifies the inherent differences between professional values and the values of organisations in which professionals are employed to the point of conflict.

Professionals lose the features of professionalism that distinguishes their work from non-professional work and become deprofessionalised when organisations require them to comply with organisational goals in preference to professional goals. This paper argues further that deprofessionalisation strikes at heart of professionalism but more importantly, it strikes at the hearts of professionals. Prior research in relation to conflict between organisational and professional values has indicated that it affects professionals' attitudes to their employing organisations, their job satisfaction and leads to increased organisational turnover. However the research is limited and needs to be expanded and refined to develop a clearer understanding of the factors that contribute to organisational turnover among professionals.

The Meaning of Professional and the Values of Professionalism

The nature of and meaning of the term professional is contentious and contested (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997; Perkin, 1989). In the colloquial, 'professional' may refer to any occupation or service for which an individual receives payment. In this paper the term professional refers to members of an occupation that has exclusive jurisdiction and a legally protected position over a particular division of labour in both internal and external labour markets (Friedson, 2001). This protected position is based on qualifying credentials gained through formal higher education that is obtained outside of the labour market (Friedson, 2001). Furthermore, this education permits professionals to practice with independence and discretion within a particular discipline (Friedson, 2001). The professional is also required to adhere to particular standards and professional ethics in the practice of their profession (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997). The education, practice standards and ethics of professionals are defined and monitored by a professional association formed by the members of the profession (Neal & Morgan, 2000).

According to Friedson (2001) professionalism is the set of institutions, whereby members of an occupation are able to control their own work rather than being under the control of consumers or managers. Friedson (2001) argues that in the ideal, the essential elements of professionalism are considered to be that the work is specialised and officially recognised as having a body of theoretically based knowledge and skills that can be exercised with discretion. Further, that the occupation has exclusive jurisdiction and a legally protected position over a particular division of labour in both

internal and external labour markets. This protection is based on the qualifying credentials defined by the occupation. The formal education to gain the qualifying credentials is controlled by the occupation and is obtained outside of the labour market. Moreover, in the ideal, professionalism asserts that commitment to doing good work and the quality of the work done takes precedence over economic imperatives (Friedson, 2001).

The phenomenon of professionalism emerged in the Middle Ages (Perkin, 1989). It is therefore a relative new comer as an economic logic and stands in contrast to both the free market and the organisational control of production of goods and services (Friedson, 2001). Arising from the intellectual specializations of the clergy, the law and later, medicine and university teaching, professionalism is distinguished from the economic paradigms of the free market and bureaucracy in that its primary trade is not in property, capital or labour but in knowledge (Friedson, 2001; Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997).

At the heart of professional ideal is the belief that the wider social benefit takes precedence to individual gain (Friedson, 2001; Lampe & Garcia, 2003). Therefore, in the ideal, professionals have a different orientation to the world to that of the market or bureaucracy. This orientation is sometimes described as altruism (Stoddard, Hargraves, Reed, & Vratil, 2001) but more accurately, it is the belief that there is an intimate link between individual interests and collective interests and that co-operative, rather than competitive behaviours, are best suited to serving the collective interest (Stilwell, 2003). Thus the purpose of professionalism is to apply systematic theoretical knowledge to problems that individuals, groups or societies face (Lampe & Garcia, 2003) with the commitment to doing good work and provision of a high quality of service taking precedence over economic requirements (Friedson, 2001; Sullivan, 2000). These principles stand in contrast to the assumptions of the free market and bureaucracy where exchange occurs primarily to benefit certain individuals or groups and may or may not have a wider social benefit.

This is not to regard professionals as being separate from the broader economy. Professionals are an integral part of the economy and necessarily participate in the market. However, as Friedson (2001) points out, although professionals consider that their purpose is to provide a service they are emphatically not servants. The professional's primary allegiance within the economic system is to the application of

professional knowledge to the situation that the client brings to the client-professional transaction (Lampe & Garcia, 2003). In the professional ideal, the professional therefore determines the service that is provided in accordance with the presenting problem and the application of their professional knowledge. Independent of the market and polity the professional ideal holds that the over-riding goal in decision-making is “the greater good” rather than the wishes of the consumer or bureaucracy (Friedson, 2001). In contrast to transactions in the market or bureaucracy where the available funds and the payer determine the service, the first point of responsibility for a professional is to the standards of practice and behaviour as defined by the profession rather than to requirements set by the employer (Stilwell, 2003). This gives the professional an independence that is not available to non-professional employees.

Ethics and the ethical practice of the profession are deeply embedded in the ideal of professionalism. Governments have, for centuries, granted professions the privilege of monopoly over their specific areas of practice and the associated autonomy to practice and set fees for their services on the express understanding that they develop and maintain the standards particular to their profession (Haines & Sutton, 2003). The role of professionals in society is thus inextricably linked to perpetuation of ethical standards and practice. The code of ethics is determined and maintained by the profession (Friedson, 2001; Neal & Morgan, 2000). These codes have been developed to both protect the wellbeing of clients and their confidence in the profession. The codes of ethical conduct also serve to protect the reputation of the profession from practitioners and practices that would harm clients and/or bring the profession into disrepute (Neal & Morgan, 2000).

Governments entrust professional associations formed by the members of the profession with the responsibility to define and monitor the education, practice standards and ethics of professionals (Neal & Morgan, 2000). The separation of the education of professionals from the workplace, has traditionally enabled professional associations to maintain the standards of practice required for admission to the profession as well as ethical standards and codes of conduct (Friedson, 2001). Professional socialisation involves the cultivation of the values and norms associated with their chosen profession as well as acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary to professional practice (Lui, Ngo, & Tsang, 2003). It is through their education that professionals are socialised to the distinct cultural values of the

profession (Friedson, 2001). Through the shared experiences of their education sense of professional community that is developed in the process of their education professionals develop identification with and a sense of commitment to the profession (Friedson, 2001).

“Economic Rationalism” and Organisational-professional Conflict

The term ‘economic rationalism’ is used by many as a general term to refer to the economic changes that have been introduced by the Australian and a number of other Western governments since the 1980’s (James, 2003). While the actual meaning of the term is widely debated and unresolved the economic reorganisation that it refers to may include policies such as competition policy, privatisation, outsourcing, the philosophy of ‘small government’ and globalisation (James, 2003).

With its increased emphasis on competition policy, ‘small government’ and privatisation, ‘economic rationalism’ has brought about significant changes to the organisation of both the private and public sector. This has had significant consequences for professionals and poses significant threats to the ideals of professionalism. In the public sector the implementation of the ‘small government’ and private sector principles through of application of competition policy through quasi-market principles, challenges the heretofore-held autonomy of professionals working in the public sector (Healy, 2002). In the increasingly global private sector the expertise of professionals has been sought to deal with the complexity of the large and unstable competitive environment (Hanlon, 1997). Many professionals, who previously have enjoyed the privilege of private practice or the protection of bureaucratic support to enable them to autonomously provide their professional service according to the ideals of professionalism and the values of their profession are now under pressure to conform to the requirements of their employing organization. This pressure to ignore professional standards and to conform to employer demands was spectacularly demonstrated in the infamous Arthur Anderson, Enron and other corporate accounting scandals of the late 1990’s and early this century. While the failure of certain professionals to maintain the ethical standards of their profession in the face of employer pressure drew world attention, the daily efforts of professionals to maintain the ethical standards of their profession in the face

of pressures placed upon them by their employing organizations draws little media and research attention.

When employing organisations place pressure on professionals to meet organisational aims in preference to meeting the professional standards of ethics and practice professionals lose the aspects of their unique qualities that distinguish them from non-professionals and they become deprofessionalised (Lampe & Garcia, 2003). Organisational-professional Conflict (OPC) is the term used to describe the situation that occurs when an organisation's values are incompatible with the professional values of its professional employees (Bamber & Iyer, 2002). The conflict of values may be between the values of professionalism and the ideology of organisational control (Shafer, Park, & Liao, 2002) or when there is incompatibility between norms of the organisation and the ethical standards set by the profession (Brierley & Cowton, 2000) or both.

Deprofessionalisation, Professional Commitment, Organizational Commitment and Turnover

The current research in relation to the effects of OPC has identified that it contributes to the turnover of professionals among organisations (Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Shafer, 2002; Shafer et al., 2002). Organisational-professional conflict has also been found to be negatively associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and professional commitment (Shafer, 2002; Shafer et al., 2002). Job satisfaction and organisational commitment are currently considered to be the two consistent predictors of organisational turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Tett & Meyer, 1993). However these analyses give little consideration to the role that commitment to the profession has in organizational commitment and turnover among professional employees (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000). Lee et al. (2000) contend that there is a need to incorporate commitment to the profession into theoretical models of organisational turnover among professionals and that the particular needs of professional employees need to be more clearly understood in order to address problems of retention of professional employees in organisations.

Occupational commitment has been shown to be significantly correlated with organisational turnover, both intended and actual, even when the effects of job satisfaction and organisational commitment, are partialled out (Lee et al., 2000). For

professional employees the key forms of work commitment relate to both the organisation and the occupation (Cohen, 1998). When comparing professional employees with non-professional employees Lee et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis demonstrated that identification with and attachment to their profession is particularly relevant to the professional employee's decision to leave the organisation. Hackett, Lapierre, and Hausdorf, (2001) reported findings that suggested that both organisational commitment and occupational commitment influence occupational withdrawal intentions and organisational withdrawal intentions via direct and indirect paths. They also argued that since withdrawal from an occupation usually implies withdrawal from the organisation, efforts in relation to organisational retention need to take into account matters that affect commitment to the occupation as well as commitment to the organisation. Since OPC has been negatively associated with job satisfaction, professional commitment and organisational commitment it is therefore highly likely that it increases organisational turnover via the direct path of decreasing organisational commitment and by the indirect path of decreasing professional commitment.

Deprofessionalisation Strikes at the Heart of Professionals

The majority of the research that uses the term Organisational Professional Conflict is so far found in the literature of the accounting profession. However there is ample evidence in the literature of many professional disciplines that indicates that conflict between the ideals of professionalism and the values of organisations in which professionals are employed is creating a growing unrest among professionals. There is growing concern among professionals that the rise of 'economic rationalism' is leading to deprofessionalisation and is threatening to strike at the very heart of the professional ideal of the ethical application of knowledge to provide a service that protects the interests of the collective rather than serving the interests the individual.

Haines and Sutton (2003) highlight the pressures that public hospital engineers have to deal with when being required to satisfy the contradictory demands of being a 'cost conscious entrepreneurial risk-manager' as well as a 'risk-averse maintainer of professional standards. Research by Lait and Wallace (2002) found that among Human Service Workers higher levels of job stress were associated with restricted ability to fulfil their professional expectations to work with autonomy and discretion

and where conflict between their obligations to the employing organisation and their responsibilities to their clients was experienced. Sumner and Townsend-Rocchiccioli (2003), point out that motivation for most nurses to enter the profession of nursing is the professed need to help others. This desire to help others is positioned as a responsibility in the professional discourse of nursing and forms an integral aspect of professional enculturation. However the greater emphasis on marketisation, competition, cost-cutting and down-sizing in health care (Wong, 2003), whether provided in the public or private sector, has been documented as challenging nurses professional ethics (Doane, 2002). Furthermore, nurses are confronted with moral dilemmas when they recognise that their ethics are challenged but they are unable to take appropriate actions because of the structural obstacles located within their organization (Corley, 2002).

Similarly in the medical profession, long considered one of the bastions of professionalism, corporatisation and the 'industrialisation' (Rastegar, 2004) of health care results in an "ethos gap" between managers and clinicians and or health care teams (Pendleton & King, 2002). Increasingly, doctors who hold the core value of maintaining a high standard of caring for patients are being forced to work in ways that compromise their deeply held core personal values (Pendleton & King, 2002). Erosion of professional autonomy by the corporatisation of health care has been demonstrated to have a highly negative effect on the career satisfaction of physicians in the USA (Stoddard et al., 2001) and a serious decrease in morale amongst general practitioners in the UK (Pendleton & King, 2002). Moreover Pendleton and King (2002) argue that when doctors and nurses are unable to act in accordance with their deeply held professional values, there will be serious effects on retention in and attraction to both professions.

University teaching is a bulwark of professionalism that originated early in the history of professions (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997) and has influenced the development of civilisation through placing a high value on independent, scholarly pursuit of knowledge (Nossal 1997). Universities have long stood as the independent voice that is able to "Talk truth to power" (Zipin & Brennan 2003, p.365). This independence has made it possible for academics to challenge societal assumptions and critique the gap between what is and what might be (Scott, 2003). Furthermore by

commenting on what is possible and what is desirable, universities have been able to act as a moral force in society (Scott, 2003).

The application of the corporate model to universities has seen increasing demands from industry to supply them with 'products' able to meet industry requirements (Harley, Muller-Camen, & Collin, 2004). University academics face the prospect of deprofessionalisation (Harley et al., 2004) when the independent development of knowledge by university academics, which presumes a wider social benefit, is contested and their value to society is depicted as relating only to their ability to teach in order to serve the purposes of industry (Lomas, 1997). Zipin and Brennan (2003) point out that the effect of the dissonance between the 'new' norms and rules existing in the new economic system relative to the personal/professional dispositions that have drawn academics to their field has produced a crisis of 'habitus' for many academics such that they verge on a psycho-emotive identity crisis.

Furthermore, deprofessionalisation of university academics augments the deprofessionalisation of all professionals. Professional associations have retained control of professional education through course accreditation and by awarding the relevant professional qualification (Neal & Morgan, 2000). University academics' are therefore entrusted with the responsibility of professional socialisation as well as development of the knowledge and skills necessary to professional practice (Lui, Ngo, & Tsang, 2003). The importance of professionalism to the practice of the profession is devalued when the ideology of market ascendancy dictates that preference in university education should be given to vocational readiness. This is because the emphasis on vocational readiness in preference to professionalism situates professionals as workers or servants of their employing organisation rather than as autonomously practicing professionals. Furthermore, university academics' own professional values require them to develop the capacity for social critique in their students. When their professionally independent role of societal critique and the development of new knowledge is constrained by or dependent on the market, the university academics' ability to nurture the values of professionalism in new generations of professionals is restricted (Arthurs, 2001). Deprofessionalisation of university teaching therefore strikes not only at the hearts of university academics, it strikes deeply to the heart of professionalism itself.

Expansion and Refinement of Organisational-professional Conflict Research Needed

The concept of Organisational-professional Conflict was first mooted as having an effect on turnover among professionals in the late 1950's (Aranya & Ferris, 1984). This early research found relatively low levels of OPC (Aranya & Ferris, 1984; Gunz & Gunz, 1994). However, the early research into OPC took place in the era of the politically created welfare state (Hanlon, 1997) and was therefore conducted at a time when where organisations that employed professionals tended to be those that supported their professional aims or when the options to self-select into private or professional group practice were greater. Additionally, recent research in relation to OPC has also used samples where professional employees have the option to self-select into independent or private practice or employment in public or private sector organisations. This may also account for the low levels of measured OPC found in the more recent studies (Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Gunz & Gunz, 2002). Some professionals, such as nurses, teachers and human service workers have limited opportunity to elect to work as independent or private practitioners. They may find that their only option to continue working in their profession may be to choose among organisations having similar values. They may thus experience higher levels of OPC than professionals who have other employment options.

Furthermore previous findings in relation to the conflict of values between organisations and professions have been generally derived from cross-sectional samples (Gunz & Gunz, 1994; Lee et al., 2000; Shafer, 2002). This means that the prior or later organisational turnover of respondents among organisations has not been accounted for in the studies. Cross-sectional studies can and do suggest relationships among OPC, professional commitment, organisational commitment, job satisfaction and intention to turnover (Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Brierley & Cowton, 2000; Shafer, 2002; Shafer, Park, & Liao, 2001), but longitudinal studies are needed confirm this (Shafer, 2002). Similarly, longitudinal studies are required to empirically establish the effect of exposure to work environments on the professional commitment of professional employees (Lee et al., 2000). Longitudinal research is needed to establish the relationships between professional commitment on entry to professional practice and OPC and the subsequent effects on professional commitment, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and organisational turnover.

Conclusion

The changed political-economic context of the last three decades has seen increasing numbers of professionals who are employees. More notably, the contemporary political-economic context amplifies the inherent conflict between organisational values and professional values. When organisations pressure professionals to comply with organisational goals in preference to professional goals professionals become deprofessionalised through loss of the features of professionalism that distinguish their work from non-professional work. There is clear evidence in the literature that professionals are not only psychologically linked to their work by their relationship with their organisation but also by their relationship to their profession. Factors such as conflict between the values of the organisation and the professional that lead to deprofessionalisation strike at heart of professionalism. More importantly, it also strikes at the hearts of professionals. Research in relation to organisational-professional conflict has linked it with effects on the attitudes (job satisfaction, organisational commitment, professional commitment) and behaviours (organisational turnover and intent to leave the profession) of professionals in organisational contexts. In a climate of skill shortages (DEWR, 2004) where shortages are intensified by turnover there is a need to develop a clearer understanding of the factors that contribute to organisational turnover among professionals.

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