

# Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology

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## CONTENTS

Preface .....	xi
Acknowledgments .....	xiii
List of Contributors .....	xv
List of Tables and Figures .....	xvii

### PART ONE

#### THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN COMPARING SOCIETIES

1. Comparing Societies around the World .....	3
<i>Henry Teune</i>	
2. Comparing Societies across Sizes and Scales .....	12
<i>Mattei Dogan</i>	
3. Comparing Societies: Qualitative Methods .....	21
<i>Julian Go</i>	
4. Comparing Societies: Quantitative Methods .....	30
<i>Peter Ph. Mohler</i>	

### PART TWO

#### COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

1. Ancient Civilizations .....	45
<i>S.N. Eisenstadt</i>	
2. Empires, Imperial States, and Colonial Societies .....	58
<i>George Steinmetz</i>	
3. Modern Societies .....	75
<i>John A. Hall</i>	
4. The Diverse Uses of Digital Formations .....	89
<i>Saskia Sassen</i>	

### PART THREE

#### COMPARING INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

1. Population Structures .....	103
<i>Arland Thornton</i>	
2. Social Inequality and Mobility .....	113
<i>Sandra Buchholz and Hans-Peter Blossfeld</i>	
3. State Structures .....	121
<i>Victor Nee and Michael Siemon</i>	

4. Parties and Party Systems .....	128
<i>Thomas Saalfeld and Margret Hornsteiner</i>	
5. Economic Systems: Comparative Historical Method in Economic Sociology .....	136
<i>Andrew Savchenko</i>	
6. Multi-Ethnic Societies .....	144
<i>Ralph D. Grillo</i>	
7. The Sociology of Religion .....	154
<i>William D'Antonio and Anthony J. Pogorelc</i>	
8. Corporations and Commerce .....	163
<i>Harland Prechel</i>	
9. The Metropolis .....	174
<i>Anthony M. Orum</i>	
10. Voluntary Organizations and Civil Society .....	182
<i>Joonmo Son</i>	
11. Family Systems in Comparative Perspective .....	190
<i>Stephen K. Sanderson</i>	
12. Gender and Society .....	199
<i>Harriet Bradley</i>	
13. Professions .....	209
<i>Joseph C. Hermanowicz and David R. Johnson</i>	
14. Social Welfare Systems .....	217
<i>James Midgley</i>	
15. The Sociology of Language: A Return Visit .....	226
<i>Joshua A. Fishman</i>	
16. Comparative Sociology of Education .....	236
<i>David P. Baker</i>	
17. Mass Media .....	243
<i>William A. Gamson</i>	
18. Mass Culture .....	252
<i>Mike Featherstone</i>	
19. Comparative Military Organization .....	262
<i>Michelle Sandhoff and David R. Segal</i>	
20. The Social Organization of Science and Technology .....	272
<i>Wenda K. Bauchspies</i>	
21. Cross-National Public Opinion Research .....	281
<i>Tom W. Smith</i>	

PART FOUR  
COMPARING SOCIAL PROCESSES

1. Economic Development and Growth .....	293
<i>Erich Weede</i>	
2. The Emergence of Nation-States .....	311
<i>Hendrik Spruyt</i>	
3. The Development of Nationalism and Citizenship .....	321
<i>Veljko Vujačić</i>	
4. Modernization and Globalization .....	331
<i>Robert M. Marsh</i>	
5. Democratization .....	342
<i>Luis Roniger</i>	
6. Political Socialization and Values .....	352
<i>Henk Vinken</i>	
7. Voting Behavior and Public Opinion .....	360
<i>Harald Schoen</i>	
8. Communication in the Internet Age .....	370
<i>Karen A. Cerulo</i>	
9. Demography and Migration .....	379
<i>Jack A. Goldstone</i>	
10. Crime, Imprisonment, and Social Control .....	387
<i>Bill McCarthy</i>	
11. Social Problems .....	396
<i>Robert Heiner</i>	
12. Social Deviance .....	402
<i>Steve Hall</i>	
13. Social Movements and Collective Behavior .....	410
<i>Mario Diani</i>	
14. Terrorism .....	418
<i>Michel Wieviorka</i>	
15. Hazards and Disasters .....	427
<i>Kathleen Tierney</i>	
16. Internal Wars and Revolution .....	437
<i>Ekkart Zimmermann</i>	
17. International War .....	449
<i>Jack S. Levy</i>	

18. Ecology and Environment .....	457
<i>Andrew K. Jorgenson, Riley E. Dunlap and Brett Clark</i>	
19. Leisure and Consumption .....	465
<i>Robert A. Stebbins</i>	
20. Small Groups, Networks, and Social Interaction .....	474
<i>Linda D. Molm</i>	
21. Emotions and Social Life .....	482
<i>Jonathan H. Turner</i>	
22. Trust .....	492
<i>Piotr Sztompka</i>	
23. Collective Memory .....	499
<i>Amy Corning and Howard Schuman</i>	

## PART FIVE

## COMPARING NATION-STATES AND WORLD REGIONS

1. Asian Sociology in an Era of Globalization (with Emphasis on Japan, China, and Korea) .....	511
<i>Masamichi Sasaki</i>	
2. European Societies .....	524
<i>William Outhwaite</i>	
3. American Society .....	540
<i>Claude S. Fischer and Benjamin Moodie</i>	
4. Latin American Societies .....	557
<i>Miguel Angel Centeno</i>	
5. The Middle East and North Africa .....	574
<i>Glenn E. Robinson</i>	
6. Sub-Saharan Africa in Contemporary Perspective .....	593
<i>Danielle Resnick and Nicolas van de Walle</i>	

## PART SIX

## BIOGRAPHIES OF EXEMPLARY COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGISTS

Perry Anderson .....	613
Giovanni Arrighi .....	614
Daniel Bell .....	615
Reinhard Bendix .....	617
Albert J. Bergesen .....	618
Rae Lesser Blumberg .....	619

Fernand Braudel .....	621
Christopher Chase-Dunn .....	622
Daniel Chirot .....	623
Randall Collins .....	625
Mattei Dogan .....	626
Emile Durkheim .....	627
S.N. Eisenstadt .....	629
Jack A. Goldstone .....	630
Johan Goudsblom .....	632
Andre Gunder Frank .....	633
Thomas D. Hall .....	634
Geert Hofstede .....	635
Alex Inkeles .....	635
Edgar Kiser .....	637
Melvin L. Kohn .....	638
Krishan Kumar .....	640
Gerhard Lenski .....	640
Seymour Martin Lipset .....	642
Michael Mann .....	643
Robert M. Marsh .....	645
Karl Marx .....	647
William H. McNeill .....	649
Barrington Moore, Jr. ....	650
Charles Ragin .....	652
Dietrich Rueschemeyer .....	653
Stephen K. Sanderson .....	654
Theda Skocpol .....	655
Pitirim Sorokin .....	656
Herbert Spencer .....	658
Charles Tilly .....	660
Pierre van den Berghe .....	661
Immanuel Wallerstein .....	662
Max Weber .....	664
Edward Westermarck .....	665
Karl August Wittfogel .....	667
Name Index .....	671
Subject Index .....	673

# Professions

*Joseph C. Hermanowicz and David R. Johnson*

Few ideas have been more central to understanding the organization of societies than the division of labor, and few segments of labor have sustained as much long-lasting interest than professions. The fascination is understandable: as embodiments of expertise, professions emerged as hallmarks of modern bureaucratic societies, socially mandated to coordinate society's most fateful tasks—healing the sick in the case of medicine; settling disputes in the case of law; protecting territory in the case of military; organizing knowledge and transmitting culture in the case of academe; and saving souls in the case of ministry. This classic quintet, each of its members themselves a manifestation of contested development over several centuries, foregrounded professional proliferation. Thus today many occupations possess qualities of professions, a topic of theoretic concern. While consequently difficult to delimit and define precisely, professions are nevertheless unmistakably central in sociological thinking because of their role in organizing specialized knowledge and delivering technical skill. It is thus clear why the professions are a concern in the writings of classical social thinkers as much as of contemporary scholars.

## **Classical Foundations and Early Treatments**

The intellectual origins of the sociology of professions emerged in the context of industrialization during the late 19th century. Classical sociologists considered the professions a central feature of society and a key to understanding social structure. Professions thus figured prominently in key theoretical statements by sociologists on the problems of action and social order in modern society. Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim articulated the most explicit early statements about the sociological significance of professions. Arguably the first among the major social theorists to emphasize the importance of professions to societal well-being, Spencer, though rarely cited in contemporary discussion, was the first to explain how professions emerge. His analysis of professions was developed in a theory of societal development, which postulated an evolutionary movement from simple homogenous societies to complex differentiated societies (Spencer 1886). According to Spencer, professions emerged in a

stage of societal development when basic needs of survival have been met. Whereas other institutions evolved to defend, sustain, and regulate life, professions emerged to enhance or augment life—for example to extend life expectancy, to protect the rights of citizens, and to provide knowledge (Spencer 1886). These and other professional roles are connected to the decentralization of state control. As societal organization shifted from a centrally-controlled command economy to market-based industrial society, professions emerged in a regulative role to manage uncertainty and social change on behalf of society (Spencer 1886).

Durkheim, the more central early figure, owing in part to his coinage of the root concept, the “division of labor”, sought to explain social cohesion in the midst of industrialization, which he believed undermined the ability of traditional social institutions, such as the family and religion, to impart common values and constrain individualism. By Durkheim's view, while all occupational groups constituted a key basis of social integration ([1893] 1964), professions were of particular importance because they linked the central authority of the state to the development of civic morals in individuals (1957). For Durkheim, professions exercised expertise in the interest of the public and acted as guardians of the moral order of society.

Classical sociologists' emphasis on the function of professions vis-à-vis their role in sustaining a social order, together with the crystallization of sociology as a unique field at around the turn of the century, helped to build a foundation for further scholarly inquiry, a sociology of occupations and professions beginning to emerge circa the 1930s. A.M. Carr-Saunders and P.A. Wilson's (1933) catalogue of professions in Great Britain is the first modern, full-scale treatment of the subject. The intellectual contributions of two sociologists in particular, Everett C. Hughes and Talcott Parsons, were critical to the field's growth. Like their predecessors, Hughes's and Parsons's interest in professions stemmed from analysis of basic sociological problems. Unlike earlier work, however, Hughes and Parsons were the first to subject professions to systematic study and theoretic formulation.

It is easy to overlook the fact that Parsons and Hughes worked and wrote in the same period,

because their scholarly backgrounds and subsequent approaches differed tremendously. Parsons's concerns were macroscopic and theoretic, Hughes's microscopic and descriptive. Parsons developed a structural-functionalist line of thought, Hughes an interactionist perspective. Parsons was the quintessential grand theorist, Hughes less explicitly theoretical but instead oriented to a pedagogical-like spelling out of ideas. Parsons wrote in often impenetrable high Germanic style. Most of Hughes's essays emerged from his lectures, the narrative reflecting these origins to a point of colloquial informality.

Parsons's key arguments emerged through a critique of predominant conceptions of social order, one advanced by a group of utilitarian economists, another by the sociologist Max Weber. Utilitarian economists such as Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill viewed the social order of capitalist society as constituted by individuals' pursuit of self-interest. Weber viewed modern society in terms of a rational-legal order in which the pursuit of self-interest was normatively constrained through the application of impersonal rules on a universalistic basis, a mode of authority best exemplified in bureaucratic organization (Weber 1964). In Parsons's view, the emergence and proliferation of professions, which he claimed was "the most important single component in the structure of modern societies" (Parsons 1968, 545), challenged both claims. To the utilitarians, professions' altruistic motives suggested that they were either an anachronism in modern capitalism or an alternative means to a shared normative end. To Weber, the individualized nature of professional practice appeared to be inconsistent with a bureaucratic emphasis on supervision and control.

Parsons transcended these seemingly paradoxical aspects of professions in the modern economic system in his landmark essay, "The Professions and Social Structure" (1939). By identifying structural similarities and differences between business and professions, Parsons sought to demonstrate that the highly-refined division of labor was not based on individual self-interest, but was rather socially emergent and socially maintained. Parsons argued that scientific rationality, which he viewed as empirically prominent in both business and professional spheres, is "institutional, part of a normative pattern" (Parsons 1939, 459) in which

the quality of work is situated in a group-based frame of reference that is independent of traditional judgments. Second, he showed that the authority of both bureaucratic organizations and professions is predicated on functional specificity, or the circumscription of a practitioners' expertise from factors unrelated to one's work. Under bureaucratic organization, specificity of function is limited to one's office, whereas professional functional specificity applies to a particular field of knowledge, and throughout a professional field of practice. Third, Parsons demonstrated the motivational differences between business and professional practitioners. In his view, individuals in groups possess a shared orientation to achievement of success. Individuals may be self-interested, but in their behavior, professionals are oriented to institutionally-specific definitions of occupational achievement.

T.H. Marshall's (1939) classic piece from the same period underscored the necessity of a profession's altruistic service-ideal, in which practitioners are obliged to society to ensure that their work is done in accordance to a social good. Foreshadowing currents on the horizon, Marshall contended that state control undermined professional autonomy and a professional's ability to provide personalized services in comparison with the standardized routines of trade occupations.

Parsons challenged utilitarian economists' conception of social order based on the pursuit of self-interest by showing that scientific rationality serves society at large and is thus deployed "divorced from the institutionalized expectation of self-interest typical of the contractual pattern of business conduct" (Parsons 1939, 460). Parsons likewise demonstrated that Weber's notion of a social order, predicated on rational-legal authority, required modification. By highlighting the impersonal normative order of science, Parsons showed that the collegial organization of professions operates as an alternative foundation for action in modern society.

Trained in, and himself forming a latter-day part of, the Chicago School of sociology, Everett Hughes's take on professions was ecologically situated and social-psychologically directed. Hughes provided a methodological and conceptual framework for understanding processes within professions. Hughes's studies of professions began in the 1930s, but it was not until several decades later



that he would publish the ideas that had been transmitted to students he trained (Hughes 1958, 1971). These included Howard Becker, Blanche Geer, Eliot Freidson, Erving Goffman, and Anselm Strauss, among others, each of whom contributed important studies to the literature on the professions. The generational reach of Hughes's influence through scholarship and students often carries the credit of having been the modern "father of the sociology of occupations."

Hughes advocated a comparative frame of reference to the study of work that examined commonalities between all types of occupations, from low-status occupations to professions. As he argued, "if a certain problem turned up in one occupation, it was nearly certain to turn up in all" (Hughes 1970, 149). The analytic objective of such an approach was to identify patterns of difference along dimensions common to all occupations. Hughes thus emphasized the importance of studying the content of work, how it is performed, the structural constraints with which workers must cope, and the meanings workers assign to their experiences. For the study of professions, the theoretic objective was to advance an understanding of professional activities in relation to both the contexts in which they are carried out and to other occupations in the social structure.

It is through this comparative approach to the study of occupations that Hughes identified what was unique and central to the essence of a profession: license and mandate. As Hughes (1958) argued, all occupations possess an implicit or explicit license, or socially-granted sanction that justifies the right of some groups to perform certain kinds of work and excludes others from doing so. Similarly, most occupations carry a mandate to define, for themselves and others, proper conduct as it relates to their work, to determine its technical basis, and its manner of delivery.

License and mandate are more manifest in professions than in other occupational groupings. Given the complex knowledge and skill that comprise the base of professional work, professions thus claim an exclusive license or legal authority to perform, evaluate, and train others to perform professional tasks. Moreover, lay people are able to evaluate neither the quality of professional work nor the competence of a practitioner. Consequently, the mandate of an occupation is most broad and absolute in professional work, and it

carries a legal, intellectual, and moral scope. Professions thus tell society what is in its best interests in a given domain of life and set the terms for understanding particular aspects of life that are connected to a domain of professional expertise.

The Hughes oeuvre is captured in the observation, bearing a patina through the masculine pronoun of the time, that "a man's work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self, indeed, of his fate in the one life he has to live... [it] is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he judges himself" (Hughes 1951, 313, 314). In addition to "license and mandate", the Hughes legacy was formed by a generative set of widely applicable ideas, which, owing their epistemological origins to the social psychologist George Herbert Mead, underscore the reciprocal interplay and interactive construction between the micro and macro, between self and society, between individual and institution. Among them: "the humble and the proud"; "mistakes at work"; "institutional office and the person"; "going concerns"; "cycles, turning points, and careers"; "career contingencies"; "career problems"; "the contradictions of status"; "dirty work"; "bastard institutions" (Hughes 1958, 1971, 1994).

### Professional Traits and Processes of Professionalization

Early- to mid-20th century sociologists established the core ideas about the structure and internal processes of professions, but a series of questions remained to be addressed in the wake of their contributions. The two chief problems that preoccupied scholars throughout the mid-20th century were: Which occupations should be called professions? And, how do they become that way? Apart from Parsons's general characterization of professions as collegially-organized experts whose work entailed a high level of trust, he never articulated the attributes of an ideal-type profession. And Hughes viewed the problem of definition as a false question:

[T]he concept of 'profession' in our society is not so much a descriptive term as one of value and prestige. It happens over and over that the people who practice an occupation attempt to revise the conceptions which their various publics have of the occupation and of the people in it. (Hughes 1971, 340)

For scholars who followed, the identification of a particular set of traits that distinguish a profession from other occupations was viewed as critical to empirical analysis. Greenwood (1957) is representative of the trait approach, which states that professions consist of distinguishing elements, including: a systematic body of theory, esoteric knowledge, authority, self-regulation, ethical codes, and a distinctive culture. A systematic body of theory refers to the theoretical, technical, and practical bases of abstract knowledge from which flow the specialized skills that characterize a profession. The advanced nature of this knowledge requires that role aspirants undergo extended socialization and “training ordeals” to acquire the technical and attitudinal competence necessary to successfully perform professional tasks. Medical students, for example, learn to heal physical ailments in ways that appeal to a theoretic body of knowledge related to precedent and codified procedure. Moreover, upon licensure, physicians are socially mandated to interpret, diagnose, and heal problems in a self-monitoring, autonomous way. Professional autonomy is predicated on self-regulation—knowledge is so technical that only experts can appropriately judge behavior. Autonomy thus implies trust between professionals and their clients, and is codified by ethical codes that sanction professional practices in a society’s functional interests.

Professions are said to exhibit a distinctive culture, their members sharing fundamental beliefs and values, and exhibiting distinctive jargon and behavior that uniquely situates them in a line of work. Professional culture, according to Greenwood, is developed in both formal and informal groups within a profession. A key part of formal professional socialization thus entails the transmission of culture that reflects a profession’s values, whereas informal culture refers to folklore, symbols, and interpersonal interactions that reinforce differences between professional and lay roles. Both formal and informal culture foster group identity and commitment to a professional role. William J. Goode (1957), in his essay “Community within a Community,” cast professions as communities bound by a common identity, values, and role definitions. By emphasizing that professions exist within a larger society, Goode emphasized how professions are subject to structural strain. This may include, for example, differences in values and behavioral demands between professions and lay society. But while professions

are dependent on the wider society in order to survive, mechanisms emerge for professions to maintain their autonomy.

The trait-approach embraced by Greenwood and others has been criticized for four main reasons. First, it is not difficult to identify occupational communities that share such traits but are far removed from the expert division of labor to which the model seeks to generalize. Professional thieves, for example, exhibit esoteric knowledge, extended training, ethical codes, restricted access, jurisdiction, autonomy, and a distinctive culture (Sutherland 1937). Second, surveys of trait-based models indicate a lack of consensus about which attributes designate a profession. Millerson (1964), for example, identified twenty-three traits in the existing literature that might constitute the definition of a profession. Moreover, he found that no single trait was universally accepted as essential. Third, traits are alleged to be static and ignore historical contingencies that shape occupational status (Freidson 1970; Johnson 1972; Larson 1977). Finally, some scholars view the trait-based approach as an ideological attempt by members of an occupation to improve their group status, and not an independent assessment of the ideal-type profession (Roth 1974).

Despite the criticism to which it has been subjected, the trait-based model directed attention toward a second question left unaddressed by Parsons and Hughes: How do occupations become professions? Although Hughes had noted the importance of understanding the attempts of workers to enhance their occupational status, he emphasized the process as a social-psychological phenomenon to the exclusion of its structural manifestation within a system of occupations. A response to trait-model criticism was to postulate a “continuum”, in which jobs possess various traits “to degrees”. Thus the well-established professional continuum, in which all occupations and jobs can be placed, consists of: full-professions (such as medicine) at one end, non-professional occupations (such as waitressing) at the other end, and “semi-professions” (such as accountancy) in the middle range.

The idea of a continuum attenuated debate over the definition of a profession by showing that occupations are not static, nor do they always fall neatly within one category. Movement toward one end of the continuum exemplifies processes of “professionalization”, to the other end, processes of “deprofessionalization”. As a result, debates in

the field subsequently turned toward the dynamics by which professions achieve their status.

In an analysis of eighteen occupations, Harold Wilensky (1964) sought to identify an observable sequence of stages in which professions acquire requisite traits on their way to professional status. According to Wilensky (1964), the ideal typical process of professionalization included five steps in a modal sequence: organization around a set of tasks; formation of an association to advance occupational interests; institutionalization of training within universities; attainment of state licensure; and formation of an ethical code.

Based on his analysis, Wilensky concluded that autonomy and altruism were the key hallmarks of a professional occupation. As he argued, understanding the properties antithetical to these traits provided a way to assess barriers to professionalization. He focused on two primary elements. First, he argued that the “technical base” for autonomy may be neither too general nor too specific. According to this logic, when a knowledge base is too broad, an occupation is unable to assert exclusive jurisdiction. By contrast, when the knowledge base of an occupation is too narrow, other individuals can perform the work. The second barrier to professionalization identified by Wilensky—the “organizational context of work”—threatens both autonomy and altruism. Organizational features that threaten autonomy include hierarchical control (as opposed to self-regulation), a locus of authority in office (rather than derived from knowledge), and routines (as opposed to autonomy of practice).

Wilensky's study offered two chief contributions to the sociology of professions. First, it shifted attention away from static conceptions of professional occupations and led subsequent theorists to pay greater attention to processes of professionalization. Second, and perhaps most importantly, it called attention to the role of organizations and environmental properties that shape the context of professional work and potentially threaten an occupation's status as a profession. This, in turn, provided the basis for later work that challenged the view of professions as autonomous unto themselves. It was a development that eventually led sociologists to incorporate conceptions of a profession's environment and, empirically, move away from exclusive concern for case studies of professions.

### Power and Professions

By the 1970s, sociologists began to reconsider professions' contract with society. A new interpretation of professions that focused on power and dominance surfaced within the field, particularly as a result of Eliot Freidson's (1970) study of the medical profession. Freidson's (1970) ethnography carried on the Hughes tradition by focusing on the everyday work setting and the routine conduct of professionals. But Freidson argued that professions secure power through protection and patronage by some elite group in society (as in the sanctioning of medicine by the university in the modern era). Having attained a dominant position within a division of labor, professions need not have a relationship with the beliefs or values of the “average citizen” (Freidson 1970). Through rich details of the content of medical work and the meanings assigned to it by physicians, Freidson demonstrated the shortcomings of focusing exclusively on structural attributes of a profession. Self-regulation and ethical codes, for example, appear more to be a projected outward appearance than an internal dynamic: “[W]hen deviant performance was observed it was not always attended to, not often communicated to others, and rarely subject to regulation” (Freidson 1970, 160). Codes of ethics and self-regulation may operate as official expectations or ideals, but not necessarily as norms of performance.

Importantly, Freidson's work also illustrated professional dominance among cognate occupations, which ultimately forced scholars to examine inter-occupational relations of professional status. Focusing on the medical division of labor, Freidson demonstrated that once the medical profession secured autonomy of technique, it perpetuated the monopoly over its work by controlling the creation and dissemination of technical knowledge and by delimiting the work roles of complementary occupations such as nursing. The theoretic outcome of such an observation was to show that despite the possession of allegedly professional traits or completion of particular sequences of professionalization, an occupation never achieves professional status as long as it is subject to the orders of another.

Whereas Freidson focused on professional power in the immediate context of work and as nestled among competing medical-related groups, Terence Johnson (1972) and Magali Sarfatti Larson

(1977) shifted the analysis of power toward broader considerations of political economy and the market for professional services. Two aspects of this analytical reorientation are noteworthy. First, the emphasis on power continued the shift away from studying professions in isolation by reconnecting concerns of classical sociologists to analyzes of the economy, state, and class system—a theoretic departure developed in Joseph Ben-David's (1963) major treatise on the position of professions in class systems across numerous societies and the outcomes for social mobility. Johnson (1972), for example, discussed professions in terms of the market for professional services. In Johnson's view, the conditions which give rise to professional power depend on the social relations between producers and consumers. In discussing the ability of an occupation to assert its own definition of the producer-consumer relationship, Johnson argued that:

It is only where an occupational group shares, by virtue of its membership of a dominant class or caste, wider resources of power that such an imposition is likely to be successfully achieved, and then only where the actual consumers or clients provide a relatively large, heterogeneous, fragmented source of demand. (1972, 43)

Professional control, according to Johnson, is thus an institutionalized mechanism for organizing work shaped by relations of social and economic dependence in the class system. According to this view, professions may not be insularly examined because the achievement of professional control is contingent on the power of clients, the state, and corporate bureaucracies.

An additional noteworthy development emerged from the power perspective: the extent to which professions became more critically viewed as exploitative groups. This view figures most prominently in Larson (1977), who argued that professionalization is based on an ideology that has as its objectives market dominance and the obstruction of the free movement of labor. Larson argued that professionalization amounts to

the process by which producers of special services sought to constitute *and control* a market for their expertise. Because marketable expertise is a crucial element in the structure of modern inequality, professionalization appears *also* as a collective assertion of special social status and as a collective process of upward social mobility. . . . [The] constitution of professional markets inaugurated a new form of structured inequality. (Larson 1977, xvi–xvii, original italics)

For Larson, there is little distinction between professionalization as a collective mobility strategy and the attempts of corporate capital to restrain competition through state regulation of markets. Both strategies entail attempts to dominate the market for particular services and to maintain social inequality. Nor does Larson view market control as a reflection of skill, expertise, or ethical standards. Rather, market control is the outcome of an occupation's successful attempts to monopolize a body of knowledge, access to it, and the services that result from it.

Arguments offered by Freidson, Johnson, and Larson are tied together by a view of professionalization as a control mechanism, in which professions exploit advantages embedded in markets that allow them to pursue their self-interests at the expense of others. This perspective ultimately shifted the sociology of professions away from a focus on traits to power and conflict. From a trait perspective, the power theorists reduced the essence of professions to one: autonomy. By focusing, however, on either a specific labor segment, on the market, or on the class system, they shifted analysis to a more systems-based understanding of professions.

### Professions and their Environment

By the point at which the power approach had achieved prominence within the sociology of professions, scholars had examined the importance of knowledge claims to professional status and, to a limited extent, the relationship between professions and occupations within a specific division of labor, yet no one had perceived the importance of the connection between the two until Andrew Abbott's (1988) study of the system of professions. For Abbott, a critical characteristic of a profession is its possession of a body of abstract knowledge on which it bases its claims for the exclusive right to perform and control specific work activities. According to Abbott, this claim constitutes a profession's "jurisdiction", or the link between a profession and its work. Whereas power theorists emphasized the importance of how professions represent knowledge claims to clients, the state, or class interests, Abbott argued that knowledge claims are best studied in the context of boundary disputes—the competing claims to a profession's tasks.

By focusing on contests over tasks, Abbott illustrated how variations in the content of work and inter-occupational relationships bring about

jurisdictional control. This departed from prior notions of dominant and subordinate occupations (e.g., physicians and nurses). Marital counseling, for example, is a task domain shared by clergy, psychiatrists, social workers, and psychologists. According to Abbott (1988), these jobs constitute a contest of jurisdiction in which occupational turf is divided into functionally interdependent parts, each group holding full jurisdiction equally in a particular task area.

Abbott's emphasis on a "system" further provided a means to understand how change in a profession's work can bring about disturbances, and successive jurisdictional contests, among competing groups. "Clientele settlement", for example, refers to the situation in which occupations emerge to provide services to a clientele ignored by a profession which claims full jurisdiction. In medicine, for instance, apothecaries, homeopaths, and chiropractors emerged within the medical division of labor to provide services to a particular clientele ignored by the medical profession. Abbott offered a new way of understanding professions that demonstrated the importance of studying the inter-occupational battles that define professional work. In this vein, the ecological underpinnings of this contemporary approach are traceable to the classical foundations laid by Everett Hughes half a century earlier.

### Future Directions

Three areas constitute promising directions for future work. Analytically distinct, the areas at times interact, and while indicative of work to be done, are inherited from lines of unfinished thought: the "internal differentiation of professions"; the "meaning of work"; and the "relationship between professions and organizations".

Despite declarations of strength conferred by hierarchical privilege, professions are not uniform. They vary internally. Yet the "internal differentiation of professions" has received only modest research attention. Hughes (and later, Abbott) advocated inter-occupational comparison, yet as much can be revealed about the structure of a profession by examining its intra-occupational similarities and differences, a strategy begun partly by Freidson (1970) and employed more fully by Heinz and Laumann (1982, 2005) in their studies of law and by Hermanowicz (1998, 2009) in his studies of academe. Social worlds within professions can be seen and studied to vary along numerous dimensions, including individuals' commitment

to work, their satisfactions, their characteristic training backgrounds and socialization regimens, and ways by which they account for their careers. The result can be a finer-tuned, more detailed, and thus a more empirically representative depiction of how professions exist.

Such concerns are related to a focus on the "meaning of work", and one can anticipate work meanings varying throughout the delimitable regions of a profession. But the meaning of work also achieves significance by the way it changes through historical time, and what it will entail in 21st century societies (Applebaum 1992; National Research Council 1999). The topic is central because, recalling Hughes, work is central to people's lives and it contains chief mechanisms by which people's fates are determined. What does it mean to be a doctor or lawyer or professor? The contexts and conditions of professional lines of work are continuing to change so that answers to the question differ, often starkly, from answers provided just a quarter-century earlier.

The contexts and conditions of professions continue to change due, in large measure, to "the relationship between professions and organizations"—another manifestation of professions and their environments. The relationship hinges on the control of work (Freidson 1984). The future of professions, as they have been known, may be singularly tied to the success they see (and, by the same token, the failure they can withstand) in controlling the terms of their work and thus abetting "deprofessionalization" and "proletarianization." The ascendance of "managed care"—the control of professions by intervention from organizations and the state—not only in medicine, but indeed also in academe, law, the military, and throughout other professions, renews in very real ways those concerns begun in the 1930s when the specialty began: autonomy and a personalized service-ideal. As a manifestation of professional environments, technological development also may be seen and studied for its effect on the structure of professions. For example, control of journalism is threatened by the ascendance of the internet; medicine by the creation of online self-diagnostic tools; academe by the emergence of instructional technologies that redefine sources of knowledge and the mechanisms of disseminating it. As much now as then, the concerns strike at the heart of professions because they determine how to embody and deliver a society's expertise.

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