

Professionalism and Professional Associations

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1 Background: Professional associations and the role allotted to them in the sociology of the professions

Arguably professional associations are at the heart of our understanding of professions and professionalism, whether they act as¹:

- guardians of the knowledge standards and the ethical codes of the profession, the focal point for their collectivity-orientation (Parsons, 1954) and a source of moral foundation for modern society (Durkheim, 1957); or as
- the actors guarding the gates of entry into the profession and thereby its monopoly position, the organisers of organized autonomy that characterises the professions (Friedson, 1970); or as
- the set of agents who are the instruments for fighting jurisdictional battles over work among the professions (Abbott, 1988); or as
- the set of agents reflecting the emergence of the professions as an aspect of capitalist state formation and development (Johnson, 1982); or as
- the outward face and general marshalling agent for competing professionalization projects through lobbying employers and the state and 'speaking' to the public through various media channels (Larson, 1977).

All of these ways of looking at professional associations begin with a concern for understanding the professions (and professionals). They begin from a perspective which asks questions like 'What part do the professions play in the established order of society?'; 'Is this occupation a profession?' (Hughes, 1963 on his early concerns); 'What are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people?' (Hughes, 1963 on his later concerns); 'How do such occupations manage to persuade society to grant them a privileged monopoly position and how do they maintain this position?' (see Larson, 1977; and Macdonald, 1995: 6).

These questions and the roles attributed to professional associations in the various theories are interesting and useful for understanding the reasons why professional associations were set up in the first place. They may also be useful for understanding how those who govern professional association conceive of them and of their own roles as guardians of the purposes for which those associations were set up. However, whatever the roles professional associations were set up to fulfil, as they develop particular governance and management structures and as they grow in terms of hiring full-time staff, they come to operate as organisations in their own right. They face similar dilemmas as other organisations in that internal structures must be developed which secure the organisation's survival and allow it to contribute to the aims of its

¹ Note that many of these authors formulate their theories of the professions in terms of functions, structures and/or processes which hardly mention specific agents and actors such as professional associations and the leaders of professional associations. However, this does not preclude explicit examination of agents and actors based on these analyses.

major stakeholders. As with other organisations this internal organisation must adapt to changing environmental conditions (and/or shape the environment) according to the aims set out for the organisation. In so doing, it is possible that the original aims of the organisation become diluted or altered, or that achievement of some of the aims of the organisation come to obstruct or crowd out other aims. This may reflect the manner in which the original aims are interpreted by key players in the governance and management of the organisation. It may reflect the way aims of key stakeholders are translated into organisation activity through those structures of governance and management. It may also reflect the way the organisation's internal workings and the personalities involved operate. To our knowledge there are few studies specific to professional associations that begin with these concerns.²

There are several studies that consider the not-for-profit or third sector organisations as a whole, usually concentrating on governance issues. However these studies generally study charities and voluntary organisations other than professional associations. Anheier (2000) views non-profit organisations as conglomerates of multiple organisations or component parts. Organisations may be structured as 'palaces' or 'tents; they may have cultures with are either technocratic or social; they may involve hierarchical or centralised control or they may operate more as a network; and finally they may be more 'outer-directed' or 'inner-directed'. Each of these possibilities represent a dimension rather than a simple either/or choice with different non-profit organisations. Shoichet (1998) suggests that third sector organisations must consider three dimensions of organisational design: planning, productivity and politics as opposed to the standard two dimensions that are normally proposed for profit organisations: effectiveness and efficiency. The added political dimension is important because of the added importance of stakeholder relationships to third sector organisations. Another model suggests that boards of directors of nonprofit organisations follow a 'life cycle', at least in certain structural elements of board member behaviour. This was suggested by Wood (1992) and further investigated by Dart, et al. (1996).

Halliday (1983, 1985; 1987) has concentrated on professional associations more directly than most. He focuses on how professional associations 'build the resources and construct the authority on which their macrosocial role rests (1987: xix). For Halliday profession association aspirations to be the moral guardians of the profession and of wider society are indeed aspirations, which are achieved imperfectly. Halliday is sensitive to the importance of organisational factors. He declares that organisational factors provide 'intervening links in a logic of action extending from epistemology to power. Differences in the means by which professions confront these organizational problems, differentiate, and interact with, the effectiveness of professions within epistemological classes' (1985: 436). However his organisational factors are confined to factors such as the degree of national integration of their organisations (British

² There are accounts of the histories of particular professional associations, (see for example Kaye, 1960; Green, 1979). However these histories, which are often commissioned by the association itself (often on the occasion of a particularly significant anniversary of its foundation) are generally written in a log book manner, their intention to provide the members with a record of how their association came to be what it had to that date. Rarely do such histories speculate on more general aspects of the situation of professional associations as a category, though they may refer to the sociological literature.

associations being more integrated on the dimension of national vs local and state-level associations compared with American ones), the degree of occupational integration (with engineering being particularly weak in England due to the 'Balkanization' of the occupation). He also points to a problem in that achieving political integration can act against achieving influence because it will mean greater heterogeneity in association membership, which will make internal decision-making and mobilization more difficult (Halliday, 1985: 437-8). Here the separation of English lawyers into two branches and other divisions on the basis of class origin, gender, type of practice and client, compensation and actual legal work are well known. After national integration and political mobilization, Halliday considers coalition formation to be a third organisational factor that intervenes between epistemological bases and effectiveness of action. Coalition formation is considered both for professions coming into contact with a cross-section of society in their normal work and with participation of professionals in voluntary associations which may subsequently join political alliances. Halliday refers here to the proportion of various professions in the House of Commons and in American state and federal legislatures.

2 *A view of professional associations*

Professional associations are regarded here not merely as agents fulfilling a role allotted to them in a general theory of the sociology of the professions, whether that role arises from the macro sociological perspective of social structures in modern society or the micro material self-interest of individuals wishing to translate knowledge resources into material capital through the pursuit of professional projects. Rather they are regarded as organisations that are:

- similar to others in that they must steer their way through potentially inconsistent pressures to maintain control over their (potentially disparate) internal parts and actors, while both manipulating and adapting to their external environment,
- different from most in that they are 'third sector' organisations; membership organisations which are neither owned by shareholders nor by the state, and
- different from all other organisations in that they are uniquely bound to a profession and to professionalism.

One way of interpreting professional associations is to understand them as formally representing either or both, the interests of the current membership or/and the interests of the profession. In this they are run by a combination of macro actors in the profession (see Mouzelis, 1995 on macro actors): on one hand the elite of the profession who achieve top honorific roles in the association – presidency, chair of governing body and/or of key committees, on the other hand the top position(s) within the full-time staff hired by the representatives of the membership. Like all organisations there are agency problems between these two types of macro actors. There are also issues of agency between ordinary members and those who are 'elected' to take on the chief governance roles of the association. These agency problems parallel agency problems between major shareholder representatives on boards of directors and the CEO (and other top managers) on one hand and agency problems between what are normally the majority of small scale shareholders, and the major shareholders who have a direct face-to-face involvement with governance of private corporations.

Here we argue that professional associations are changing in response to pressures from members, government and the general public. Professional associations are becoming less 'club-like' and more strategic in their relations with their members and in their relations with other stakeholders.

Consider the following argument.

- a) From the mid-twentieth century there has been a tremendous growth in the professions, both in traditional professions and the professionalisation of new occupations (Wilensky, 1964). Connected with this growth in professionalisation of a diverse range of occupations has come an intensification of competition within and between professions (see Perkin, 1989; though Abbott 1988 sees this as a permanent feature of the system of professions).
- b) These long term trends culminated during the early 1990's in intensifying pressure on professionals from Government, consumers and employers to:
 - improve standards and quality of service;
 - be accountable for their professional conduct;
 - maintain their professional competence;
 - become more flexible in the way they work and the services they offer (See Watkins, Drury and Preddy, 1992).
- c) In addition these days the whole notion of professionalism has lost some of the authority that it enjoyed in the mid-twentieth century. Clients and governments have become more demanding of both professionals and their associations. The UK government has become less willing to accept professional monopolies and less willing to rely on self-regulation (see OFT, 2001). As a result professional associations have to satisfy a complex range of economic, political and social objectives that mean they are subject to different sets of external constraints and accountabilities. They should be politically astute; balancing the interests of their various membership constituencies, having regard to stakeholders beyond the membership. In order to do so, in addition to balancing the needs of current members with potential future and past members, associations must also act in the interest of specific external stakeholders (such as clients of members) and the wider public.³
- d) Pressures on professional associations both to adapt to meet the new demands on professionals and to meet direct challenges on them from outside the professions are leading to changes in the way these associations operate. Based on casual evidence Watkins, Drury and Bray (1996) identified changes in the following areas:
 - i) *Running a professional association*
 - From focus on administration to strategic planning

³ A similar dilemma faces privately owned corporations in that they must balance the aims of shareholders with potential shareholders and other stakeholders. Individual small-scale shareholders are concerned generally with short-term profitability as it reflects on the short-term share price of the corporation. However other stakeholders, top management, workers, suppliers, customers, are likely to be more concerned with the

- From bureaucratic organisation to professionally run and managed organisation
 - Reduction of dependence on member subscriptions
 - From ad hoc range of services to provision of focused services
 - From ad hoc promotion of services to professional marketing
 - Towards decentralisation to regional offices and revival of branch networks.
- ii) *Education and training of professionals*
- From internal accreditation to closer links with HE and employers and accreditation of HE courses
 - From technical knowledge-based to transferable/generic skills in the syllabus
 - From academic/professional qualifications to accommodation of vocational and competence-based qualifications
 - From exclusive entrance based on education based courses and exams to providing a ladder of opportunity and accreditation favouring prior learning to open up the profession.
- iii) *Continuing professional development (CPD)*
- From initial professional qualifications to defining and promoting the benefits of structured CPD
 - From predictable traditional careers to linking career planning and personal development to CPD
 - From voluntary to compulsory CPD
- iv) *Maintaining standards and quality*
- Revisions of codes of conduct and introduction of codes of practice
 - Disciplinary procedures focused on eradicating gross incompetence and corruption to focus on maintaining high standards of competence and integrity for the whole profession
 - From ad hoc disciplinary/complaints procedures to effective procedures based on specific criteria
 - From standards dependent on personal integrity and weak regulation by the professional body to proactive quality initiatives
- v) *Strategic directions for professional associations*
- Increased collaboration with other professional bodies
 - Increasing diversity and specialisation
 - From inward to outward looking with greater awareness of other stakeholder needs
 - From UK emphasis to becoming global institutions with a UK base.

Overall, these trends added up to a general change in professional associations towards becoming more focused, more strategic, more structured, more reflective, in short, more professional.

Watkins, Drury and Bray was based on 40 interviews with senior representatives of professional associations and a number of focus groups carried out during 1995. According to the authors the document was intended 'to illustrate and highlight broad trends only' (1996: iii). Systematic evidence was not provided for any of these trends, rather a number of short case studies were presented as examples. A follow-up quantitative study was anticipated, but never carried out.

In 1998 the Professional Association Research Network (PARN) was established. Through PARN a number of separate studies have been carried out and workshops organised on several of the issues identified in Watkins, Drury and Bray. These were supported by a survey carried out in 2003. The survey was mailed to 311 UK professional associations and 129 useable responses were returned (see Friedman and Mason, 2004a for a description of the questionnaire and supporting methods of data gathering). In addition a very similar questionnaire was sent to 114 professional associations in Ireland and 25 usable responses were returned, these are described, along with comparisons between UK and Irish associations in Friedman and Mason, 2004b). Together there were therefore 154 useable responses, a substantial 36% sample overall.

While it is not possible to compare directly the situation in 1995 with that of 2003, there are some indicators that at least some of the trends proposed by Watkins, Drury and Bray have come to pass. Only one or two examples from each of the broad areas outlined above will now be elaborated.

i) Running a professional association

The fundamental proposition in this set of predictions may be summarised as a change from associations run like clubs, primarily relying on the voluntary effort of the members through ritualised, honorific and time-consuming governance practices (large councils with an elaborate committee structure) towards relying on relatively high level full-time staff and more flexible governance structures. At PARN we have collected casual evidence that this has in fact occurred at a number of associations, however as the 1996 study did not provide a benchmark for comparison it is difficult to infer from the reported results of the 2003 survey how the numbers of full-time staff, number of committees and council sizes reported compare with earlier periods. On average respondent associations in the UK reported 56 full-time staff with a median level of 15 staff. For associations in Ireland the comparable figures were only 5 on average and a median number of full-time staff of 3 (Friedman and Mason, 2004b: 8). UK professional associations had on average 9 permanent committees and Irish associations had 6. The average size of Council for UK associations was 32 and for Irish associations it was 20 with medians 28 and 19 respectively. Two associations had more than 100 members on council. On one hand the professionalisation of professional associations seems to be proceeding apace in that 67% of associations stated that their most senior salaried member of staff was a chief executive, rather than secretary general, executive officer, director general, administrative secretary or office manager. This seems to indicate a more strategic role for the head of full-time staff. On the other hand, few allow any full-time staff to vote on council, only 16% of the UK sample and 4% of the Irish sample (Friedman and Mason, 2004b: 24, 29). These figures suggest that the process of professionalisation of professional associations in terms of them being run by volunteers to full-time staff still has some

way to go. It may be that what is happening is that there is a rise in use of full-time staff but with little reduction in the use of volunteer effort. Further surveys in future are needed to test this proposition.

Reduction of dependence on member subscription income seems to have continued. Watkins, Drury and Bray suggested that 75% dependence on member subscription income was 'fairly typical', though they noted a few associations with income from subscriptions at less than 10% of total income (1996: 22). In the 2003 UK and Irish surveys the median percentage income from member subscriptions was only 45%. Only 20% of associations in Ireland and 38% in the UK reporting that subscription income accounted for more than 60% of total income (2004b: 52). The impression from the 1996 study was that most associations would have come into this category.

ii) Education and training of professionals

Only just over half the associations (52%) reported that they develop and design their own initial training syllabus according to the 2003 survey. In this Irish and UK respondents reported virtually the same proportion. This would seem to accord with the 1996 prediction. There was a significant difference between Irish and UK responses to the question of how many accredit the qualifications offered by others, 76% of the Irish associations and only 48% of those in the UK. The proportions reporting that they accept specific qualifications offered by others but neither design nor accredit them was 32% in Ireland and 46% in the UK (Friedman and Mason, 2004b, 75). It would seem that Irish associations are further down the line in establishing close relations with higher education institutions compared with those in the UK.

The prediction that associations would be moving from technical knowledge-based to transferable/generic skills in the syllabus seems to have been rather misstated. What seems to have been occurring is a growth in transferable/generic skills in the syllabus along side continuing emphasis on the technical knowledge-base. The following table taken from Friedman and Mason (2004b, 76) illustrates this.

Content of initial professional qualifications

Content of IPQ	Irish respondents	UK respondents
Profession specific requirements	92%	94%
Generic management skills	56%	56%
Inter-professional team working	28%	41%
Client service	40%	39%
IT – Internet	28%	18%
IT – Other	44%	31%
Ethics	64%	59%
<i>Base</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>129</i>

iii) Continuing professional development (CPD)

Certainly CPD policies and programmes have become an essential aspect of professional association activities. The majority of associations, 70%, reported having a formal CPD policy and most of those that did not currently have a policy reported

that the issue was under review. This is a remarkable proportion. The concept of CPD in the UK originated in the 1970s and was only began to be formally adopted and defined by professional associations in the 1980s. It is still an unstable, and to some extent a contested concept, because it can refer to personal professional development or to professional competence or both (see Friedman et al. 2000; Friedman and Phillips, 2004).

However the prediction that CPD would move from being voluntary to compulsory does not seem to have come to pass. Only 16% of the combined sample reported that their CPD programmes were compulsory. However the rest were not all voluntary. The proportion reporting it to be voluntary was 44%. In addition 16% reported their compliance expectation of members to be 'obligatory' and a further 16% reported a mixed policy, which usually meant that it was a mixture of compulsory and voluntary, that is, it was compulsory only for a minority of members, generally a condition of receiving a higher status of membership in the association. Several factors can explain these findings.

There is clearly pressure from several quarters to make CPD compulsory, particularly from specialist regulators in the UK such as the General Medical Council. On the other hand associations initially introducing CPD almost always begin with a voluntary policy. Together these factors would be consistent with the 1996 prediction. However there is also some casual evidence of associations trying out a stated compulsory CPD policy and then drawing back from it due to the high cost of monitoring compliance and administering sanctions and the possibility of losing members if the policy is regarded as 'draconian' by the membership.

Here we have an example of an organisational dilemma faced by professional associations. In their role to raise the status of the profession in the eyes of clients, the media and governments, one would expect them to pursue a compulsory CPD policy. However, as agents for the interests of their current members, professional associations must retain the support of the membership. This is particularly so for those representing professions where the association is not a licensing authority, where the professionals do not have to become members of the association in order to practice. This suggests that associations are not the mere instruments of professionalisation projects. Rather they must deal with conflicting aims particularly between the long-term aims associated with professionalisation projects and the short-term material interests of the current membership.

iv) Maintaining standards and quality

A surprisingly high proportion of associations, 70%, reported that they had reviewed their ethical codes within the past 3 years. In addition 40% reported that they planned to review their codes in the next 12 months (Friedman and Mason, 2004b: 84-85). It may be that this reflects the trend predicted by the 1996 study. It does seem to reflect specific issues of professional misconduct with very high media profiles in the past few years, such as the ENRON, Shipman and pension miss-selling scandals.

v) Strategic directions for professional associations

In relation to the prediction that professional associations were changing from inward to outward looking organisations with greater awareness of other stakeholder needs, we asked if associations had agreed objectives for initiating contacts with the media,

58% responded yes, and if they had agreed objectives for responding to the media for which 60% responded yes. In addition 35% reported that they had a specialist person or department within the association organisation whose prime responsibility was speaking to the press, and a further 4% used an external specialist PR agency (Friedman and Mason, 2004b: 89)

3 *Conclusions*

We would suggest that new light can be thrown on the traditional questions that have occupied the sociology of the professions, if we approach these questions more indirectly, by examining professional associations in their own terms as organisations. Professional associations are themselves undergoing a professionalisation project. This is involving a fundamental shift from an emphasis on voluntary effort on the part of members towards the employment of substantial numbers of full-time staff and full-time staff employed at a high, strategic, level in the organisation. In so doing they are arguably becoming more like the private sector organisations that are the prime subject of management and organisation theory.

We also believe that this approach will help to move the sociology of professions beyond the rather crude choice that is often drawn within the sociology of the professions, reflecting more general debates in sociological theory between traditional functionalist or structuralist perspectives as represented by Durkheim and Parsons and the new action perspective represented particularly by Friedson and Larson and to some extent Abbott, here we begin to examine professional associations from a perspective which is more sensitive to them as organisations in themselves and which inherently incorporates both structural and action perspectives. The dilemmas facing professional associations in their approach to CPD compliance described above illustrates this.

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