

Is there such a thing as professional culture?

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Hans-Einar Hem

Associate professor

Vestfold Univ. College/Dept. of Social Science/ HENAER centre

My answer to the question is a clear ‘mmmm..no’. My reason for phrasing the question may be more interesting; and that is what this paper will be about.

How are professional identities formed? Do they differ, and are professional identities at all viable? Does professionalism really exhibit a third logic of problem-solving, besides that of the market and the bureaucracy?

These are questions phrased in the invitation to this conference. Being no expert on professions as such, I am here to learn, and these are extremely interesting questions to me. But they also led me to other questions and needs for elaboration, that led me further to a core concept in my own field, anthropology, and took me back to a huge debate in the late 80’s and well into the 90’s; without really being resolved. It was the debate on *culture*.

Anthropology differs from professions¹ in that anthropology lacks practise in the sense of tacit knowledge that helps the practitioner do good and right all the time. Everything we do is based on reflection and reflexivity. My impression is that professions also want to develop academic fields of reflexive knowledge. It may therefore be of interest to get a small glimpse into the inner soul searching in other sciences.

The concept of culture

My perception of professionalism is vague and based on ideal types; it is something someone professionally educated working in the professions of the welfare state *has*, something that does something to them that makes them do what they do the way they do. They don’t even need to think about it. It sounds like a phenomenon very similar to culture.

The expression *professional culture* is something I have observed in the welfare state organisations many times. One example is when professionals protest against reduced quality of services (usually due to budget cuts) with reference to their code of conduct or their professional ethics that is a part of their professional culture.

This is similar to the way in which we have thought about culture in anthropology. With the will to squeeze out historical parallels, we can see a parallel between the relationship professions have to welfare state organisations, and the relationship that historically has been between German/American cultural anthropology and French/British social anthropology. Everywhere in municipalities executive directors and organisational development consultants for 20 years said: “structure, structure”; structure makes the organisation and everyone has to subordinate to it. At the social welfare offices and institutions professions have said “no, we

do not want to be reduced to structure. We have a culture; a helping and caring culture that cannot be transformed into structure. It is not reduceable.”

In much the same way it also started 300-400 years ago in science and philosophy. The mechanistic model of the world and the rationalism of the Enlightenment indicated that the answer was there somewhere in the future and the road went through “structure”. Everything was to be divided into smaller and smaller parts and explained by causation. It was the start of the significant movement that made us modern; that shaped science and technology, and for the longest time has been just on the threshold of the ultimate explanation of what human life really is. I must be excused for lumping together British empiricism and Descartes but, for the purpose of an historical thread running through anthropology, it’s ok.

Against this movement grows a protest as a kind of European dialectical law; since Enlightenment started as a French project, the Germans disagreed. The philosopher Herder and others formulated a protest against the rationalism of Enlightenment that became the other main current in European thinking through the next 200 years; Romanticism. Herder would not let the spirit be divided into small pieces and explained mechanically. There are entiretys here that are more than the sum of their parts.

This sounds exactly like nurses and social workers: “the others are specialists in parts, our speciality is the whole human being.”

What these entiretys really were about is somewhat unclear. At least if we apply the logic of rationalism and empiricism. The human being is special and unique, according to Herder, and we form groups that are unique. Every group of people (Volk) shares a holistic, bodily experience rooted in a common history and a common attachment to the local natural environment and a residing national character (Volkesgeist) that is expressed in language, myths and folk literature².

These are the two main currents that have put their mark on the European mentality during the last 200 years, our imagination of who we are, what kind of knowledge we possess and how we organise ourselves. Enlightenment has formed technology and science, romanticism has formed politics. Science has been searching for universal laws for human beings and nature; structure. Politics has aimed for the national state and its particular basis; national culture.

Culture and structure in anthropology

As these two main currents mentioned above have shaped most scientific fields, so too have they shaped anthropology. A hundred years ago, the French sociologist/anthropologist Emile Durkheim set the standard for French and British anthropology by making society and the social structure its object of study. From Germany, Franz Boas left for North America to study Eskimo’s colour-vision, but shifted focus, settled in the United States and founded cultural anthropology based on romanticism’s image of culture; cultural relativism.

Social anthropology had its golden age from 1918 to approximately 1970. Both in France and England it was important to understand society and culture in the Colonies, and the anthropologists contributed to this insight without becoming the handmaidens of the colonial power. The project for the British structural functionalists was to develop a social science imitating the natural sciences’ positivistic ideals. The aim was to be able to describe and explain society according to universal laws. Anthropology was very close to sociology but kept a sharp border towards history and ethnology.

In the United States, cultural anthropology took a completely different turn. Its focus was primarily on the Native Americans in their own society. The cultural anthropologist focussed on myths and rituals, cultural ceremonies, values and ways of anticipating the world; how human beings make meaning in the world. For them, language was the central focus of study. They did not draw a sharp dividing line between anthropology and history but looked at culture as something made out of an historical development interacting with, in and between groups of people and nature. It wasn't the universal. On the contrary, it was the particular that was their objective study. They did not draw a sharp dividing line between psychology and anthropology either, like Durkheim had made the French and the British anthropologists do. Several of Boas' pupils, such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, were strongly influenced by psychoanalysis and studied the inter-connection between culture and the forming of personal character, the so-called culture and personality school.

The political turn in the 1970s

During the 1970s, social anthropology went into a double crisis. First, the liberation of the Colonies made anthropologists less welcome there. Secondly, the battle over positivism tore down cumulative science. What status had anthropology really? A few attempts to formulate the Marxist anthropology were made but they never got a strong foothold in anthropology as they did in sociology. Historical materialism in New Guinea doesn't make much sense.

The renewal of anthropology came once again from Paris; this time from structuralism and Claude Levi-Strauss. It was, as the name indicates, a continuation of the structural perspective, but this time extended from society and the social to everything, including the mental. It was the human society, culture and cognition split in binary contrasts and put together in firm and constant structural patterns. Everything matched, and even culture could be universally explained. All the French and the few English who understood anything of structuralism were happy. Structuralism also had a strong influence on literary criticism and science, something that would have an impact at a later stage.

In the United States, there was no basis for a similar development. Even though Talcott Parsons and his colleagues had tried to build anthropology into their grand theory project in the 1950s, it became too narrow. His pupils Clifford Geertz and David Schneider were not happy with being a sociological reserve team, and they preferred to let cultural anthropology develop in its own direction based on phenomenology. Geertz became a guru for a renewed cultural anthropology in the 1970s and was also widely read in Europe. He dominated anthropology well into the 1980s. His eminent descriptions of culture in Indonesia and Morocco seduced us into believing that we could describe whole systems of culture and interpret meaning that was embedded in its symbols. Phenomenology and hermeneutics became the fashion and anthropology experienced a tremendous growth in the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Postmodernism

Something happened towards the end of the 1980s that became significant. The postmodernist critique of old ideals in art and culture seeped into anthropology and, in 1986, the book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*³ was published. It posed very critical questions both to anthropological theory and the methodological production of knowledge. This

marked the start of a massive production of critical texts against the established anthropology and led American anthropology into a deep crisis. The big question was “can we use the concept of culture at all?”

This was, naturally, a complex critique. It was also postmodern in its form. But parts of the critique came from more traditional anthropologists questioning the way Geertz and others interpreted the world. One of the authorities of the 1970s, Roger Keesing, wondered if culture was another word for knowledge. Even if most people in a society shared the same knowledge, especially the language, he pointed to the fact that there were also big differences in the amount and depth of knowledge each member possessed.

A visual effect of this crisis was that anthropology, especially in the United States, Australia and Great Britain, was “eaten” by a new hybrid called cultural studies. This was a subject strongly inspired by postmodernism: it was multidisciplinary consisting of anthropology, literary criticism and aesthetic theory and had Western culture as its object. Among its favourite themes were hybrid culture and subculture, previously hidden, such as gay culture.

Another reason that the crisis in anthropology in the United States was so strong in the beginning of the 1990s was that they never really had gone through the debate over positivism. The 1968 uproar in the United States had been about Vietnam and politics and not, as it had been in Europe, about philosophy and science. With its deep-rooted paranoia for communism, Marxist theory never made it to American universities. At the same time, American academic culture was extremely competitive. So when old heroes like Geertz came under attack, many joined the campaign to make a name for themselves.

The empire strikes back: culture in organisational theory

A totally different matter, but still relevant to my question, is the use of the concept of culture in organisational theory and management. After the oil crisis in the mid-1970s, American industry discovered with great shock and surprise that Japanese industry had transformed into a highly productive and effective competitor. What was the secret? Not the structure; that was under full control in the West, not technology; on the contrary, not education, not economic environment...so what was it? In 1982, Peters and Waterman⁴ published their research from successful corporations in the United States and gave the answer: the answer was culture. Culture was, in this context, a variable that could not be verified. It was the informal part of the organisation.

This suggestion was a big hit. It all made sense. Japan was full of culture. There, you were employed in a corporation as a young person and lived your life inside. The corporation covered your needs for you and your family. It had to produce heaps and heaps of culture.

The rest of the 1980s and long into the 1990s were a golden age for organisational consultants who taught corporate culture. It was the return of magic. While the rationalisation experts, for several decades, had measured movements and counted seconds to make everything as effective as possible, there was once again space for the irrational. Managers became magic symbols of the corporation and if results were bad, they had to be sacrificed to satisfy the gods on Mount Olympus or in Valhalla, now called the stock market.

A strange thing with this phenomenon was that it was influenced neither by the contemporary postmodern current nor the inner life of anthropology. The first organisational theorists had

read Geertz and, with little criticism, had taken on his cultural system. They left little space for reflection and criticism. For them, the objective was utility; to make the wheels move as fast as possible. Modernism struck back and showed how strong it was in such a convincing manner that it can only be understood through constructivism. Nothing is so objective and empirical as constructed images. The empire had struck back.

New institutionalism – everything is like agriculture

A more local revitalisation of the concept of culture was Johan P. Olsen's theory of new institutionalism. Olsen had read a book by his senior colleague at the University of Bergen, Knut Dahl Jacobsen, on Norwegian agriculture⁵, and together with his American mentor, James March, made a model of the political system in which culture was a central variable. By looking at the dates of publication, it seems that the empirical insight preceeded the model, as it should. The first trace of the model was in an article from 1978 on the segmented state⁶, while the theory book came in 1989⁷.

New institutionalism is in many ways a good theory for professional culture. The model looks at how a professional field creates a segment crossing from the centre to the periphery. In the same way, Dahl Jacobsen had described how professional education at the agricultural university at Ås had shaped the agricultural mentality from the Minister to the farmer in the same way professional education and organisations shaped the mentality of different state arenas. Culture made politics.

Professionalism – what is that?

When research on professions launched the concept of professionalism as a third logic⁸, I want to look for something behind the concept that looks like culture. As far as I understand professionalism, it is about the professional's values and knowledge regulating the access of welfare services according to a different logic than bureaucracy or market. This is politically problematic, as Eriksen has shown⁹. But that is not my point here. If we look at a profession as a group of people with common education, values and practical methods and that this is what determines how their sector functions, then we are, as far as I'm concerned, very close to a cultural system in the Geertzian meaning. But what is this really and does it give us new insight into how the welfare state functions?

Culture as a thing

Social science has been known to see both culture and society as something concrete and "thing-like". What is society? Is it more than the sum of its members? Yes, the collectivists would argue. Society is a structure and a culture that we are born into, socialise to and become. It determines who we are and what we do. No, say the individualists. Society and culture is the sum of the individuals' interaction and choices. This is the old schism between Durkheim and Weber.

A second schism is older. It is between the universal and the relativistic. Are culture and society a variation on the same theme, a basic structure that runs through the world taking different forms? Or is there something basically unique and different that makes society and culture impossible to compare and makes it necessary to understand them through their own premises?

The third schism is even older. It stems from the Greeks, but René Descartes is usually blamed. It is the schism between body and soul, the basic dualism of being human. This dualism is so basic to our way of thinking that most works on culture do not even pay it attention, but see culture as something cognitive. Even though Herder pointed to the bodily experience in culture, it did not make much of an impact. The honest exceptions, such as Merleau-Ponty, are in the minority.

The fourth schism is the last decade's postmodernism. How much can we deconstruct reality before it dissolves? Is anything connected? Or is order something we construct to be able to bear living. Postmodernism as an analytical approach has, for the most part, lost its appeal. But the open reflexivity, deconstruction and reconstruction, has given a lot of new insight. The cumulative approach in social science is dead, in theory, although, in practice, it lives on as shadow positivism.

Identity

This is the landscape in which we have to navigate when we deal with the concept of culture. It can easily become a thing, like it has in organisational theory. Culture is taken to be a force that is in the walls, that is part of the climate, like a natural phenomenon. But then we might as well use witchcraft and magic.

Culture cannot be seen as independent of human beings. Then it will only be a catalogue of habits. Culture must, if it shall be explained, live in people, changing and dynamic. Culture is not a system, it is a process.

If this is the case, it is not possible to become totally collectivistic. If human beings are not programmed robots, culture cannot live in individual humans without being affected by their interaction and choices. At the same time, we do know that we share something with other humans of the same ethnic group that we don't share with others. A truly happy Norwegian is totally alone on a mountaintop, exhausted, freezing and with slices of bread wrapped in paper. Explain the happiness of this to a French person...it is not possible.

This is what makes the concept of culture so difficult to grasp. I do think that the history of the idea of identity can be of help here¹⁰. We can trace three different routes to the concept of identity: one, an empirical and universalistic trace back to John Locke that connects identity to memory; two, the idea of identity in romanticism developed by, among others, Hegel; and three, a postmodern idea that can be traced back to Nietzsche and possibly inspired by Ibsen.

A difference between the two first roots on one side and the last is the perception of the self. Do we as human beings and selves have a permanent core, or are we but layers of constructed and fluent meaning. This makes up the fifth schism we have to take into consideration in our work with culture and there is no simple answer.

Of the modernist philosophers Charles Taylor can represent the romanticist direction in modernism. In several works, among them *Sources of the Self*¹¹, he analyses the history of the idea of the self. The self is shaped in a social, cultural and historical setting, but it has a core of values, consisting of strong evaluations. We change but stay the same person. To change strong evaluations takes a very demanding process of self reflection. It is a process we have to do our selves; as integrated selves. One of the reasons will be exactly that; to achieve better integration, and to build down psychological dissonance. It is a positive and optimistic view

of the self. It is a Christian and modernistic view, where Taylor as the son of a protestant and a catholic moves between the collective in the Catholic Church and the individual, protestant conscience. But modernist it is.

A representative of the last root is Zigmunt Baumann. He sees the self as a construction of fragments from historical situations social and cultural context. We live in worlds of flux, not only with differences between them, but continuously changing. And we change with it. The self is a social construction in the same way as the society, culture and religion is attempts to make order in a world with no order.

This gives two distinctly different views on identity. Taylor talk about an identity with a certain permanent core, although under continues reflexive development. To Baumann it is only a floating construction.¹² We are shaped by our environment, and recreate our selves through value expressions but also, and even more through aesthetic expressions. Baumann make a big point of this. We are what we consume. While the romantic, modernistic man went on pilgrimage to find himself, the post modern man is a tourist shopping aesthetic impressions.

As with the other schisms, this creates a fruitful tension. Deconstructivist has helped anthropologists remake their view of culture. It has been painful, and we are 'still in the dark' as many would say. I say we are in the middle of a good and fruitful dialectical process; I hope it never ends.

Is there such a thing as professional culture?

From what I have said so far, I suppose I will be taken to be sceptical to the concept of culture in general and professional culture specially. But, as I just said, I don't want to get there; I want to stay in the process. On the one hand I see the postmodernist critique of the concept of culture in anthropology as so important that any return to well structured cultural systems seem doomed. On the other hand I was feed so much modernism in my professional upbringing that I am not ready to give up the idea of a core in the self, a culturally relative core. My experience of being Norwegian is deep and embodied, and I can not ignore it. That is why I personally plan to bring the concept of culture with me on the road still some time. I don't know exactly for what, but still.

It is not to use on professions though. Professions is to me a bases for identity much to loose to be called a culture. Even if members of a profession share a professional language, some values and methods, it is far from being an element in the core of their identity. The strong evaluations that may seem to be part of their professional identity I think stems from others sources.

Poststructuralism (more than postmodernism) has phrased some very important questions I rather would pursue in the work with professions, professional culture and (maybe) professionalism in the welfare state. Foucault's concept of governmentality¹³ points to power and mentality. What is seen as professional culture may also be seen as implementing the values of the state in disguise.

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Noter

¹ When I refer to professions it is mostly based on my own experience with professions in health and social welfare in the Norwegian welfare state.

² Eriksen, T. H. and F. S. Nielsen (2002). Til verdens ende og tilbake. Antropologiens historie. Bergen, Fagbokforlaget.

³ Marcus, G. and M. M. J. Fischer (1986). Anthropology as Cultural Critique. Chicago, Chicago University Press.

⁴ Peters, T. J. and R. H. J. Waterman (1982). In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies. New York, Harper & Row.

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⁶ Egeberg, M., J. P. Olsen, et al. (1978). Organisasjonssamfunnet og den segmenterte stat. {Olsen, 1978 #483}.

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¹⁰ I want to thank professor Harald Grimen for this systematisation at his seminar at Oslo Univ. College, spring 2004.

¹¹ Taylor, C. (1989). Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

¹² I would suggest an explanation to why Taylor and Baumann have chosen different paths here based on their own identity work. Charles Taylor comes from Quebec in Canada. His father was an English speaking protestant, his mother French speaking catholic. He has engaged in Canadian politics and written on the philosophy of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is indeed an optimistic and modernistic project that believes in the rational and peaceful combination of difference. Canada has in many ways managed to make that happen, and it is not difficult to see that Taylor can believe in it.

Baumann is a Jew from Lithuania, a centre for Jews in Eastern- and Central Europe before WWII. During the war nearly everyone was killed, it was besides Poland and Germany one of the hardest countries to send the Jews to death camps. Baumann escaped to England just before the war. I don't think it possible, at least not easy, to make a theory of identity, of the self, of human beings and society that is based on the assumption that the self has an integrated core. How would the neighbours that pointed out the Jews to Gestapo, the soldiers, the camp workers and the executioners look inside their core? That can not be thinkable for someone with that type of life experience.

¹³ Foucault, M. (2002). Forelesninger om regjering og styringskunst. Oslo, Cappelen Akademisk Forlag.