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## Introduction: At the Intersection of Organizations and Occupations

### Abstract

[Excerpt] The lack of research and, by extension, the paucity of empirically grounded theory on organizations and occupations have left unanswered questions that are critical for understanding the social organization of work in post-industrial economies. Under what conditions are organizations likely to bureaucratize professional tasks? What types of tasks are most likely to be affected by such bureaucratization and how do occupations adjust to such changes? Conversely, what forces have transformed organizations into breeding grounds for new occupations? How are organizations affected when they employ large numbers of professionals? What dynamics occur when the boundaries between occupation and organization begin to blur?

Questions such these are grist for the papers in this volume. Our aim in assembling the papers has been to stimulate researchers and theoreticians to examine more closely the intersection between organizations and occupations. Like the authors of these papers, we believe that it is no longer wise for organizational and occupational sociology to develop as independent areas of theory and research. In fact, to continue to do so may mean that our understanding of the workplace will become increasingly unrealistic.

### Keywords

organizations, occupations, bureaucracies, workplace

### Disciplines

Human Resources Management | Labor Relations | Organizational Behavior and Theory

### Comments

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**INTRODUCTION:  
AT THE INTERSECTION OF ORGANIZATIONS AND OCCUPATIONS**

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**The State of Research on Organizations and Occupations**

Early sociological analyses of the professions almost invariably assumed that solo practice was both the prototypical and the proper form of professional employment (Cogan 1953; Goode 1957; Parsons 1968). In fact, much of this early work concentrated on explaining status differences among occupations and ignored the content and context of professional work altogether (Parsons 1939; Davis and Moore 1949; Merton, 1960). Ethnographic studies of professional practice and socialization conducted by students of E.C. Hughes in the 1950s and early 1960s were partial exceptions to this state of affairs insofar as they focused on the particulars of professional work (Becker 1951; Habenstein 1954; Hughes 1955, 1958; Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961). However, with few exceptions (e.g., Marcson 1960; Smigel 1964; Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, Ehrlich, and Sabshin 1964), even the Chicago ethnographers wrote as if professionals were largely unfettered by organizational constraints.

It was not until the late 1960s that sociologists began to examine directly the employment of professionals by bureaucracies. But because researchers continued to measure professional work by the implicit yardstick of independent practice, the bureaucratic employment of professionals was often treated as an aberration. Sociologists of the period spent much ink explaining why organizationally-embedded occupations, such as engineering and nursing, were not "real" professions (Becker and Carper 1956; Kornhauser 1962; Perrucci and Gerstl 1969; Ritti 1968; Etzioni 1969). In the sociological paradigms dominant at the time, the structural attributes of bureaucratic and professional work were simply antithetical. Freidson (1971), therefore, spoke for an entire generation of occupational sociologists when he claimed that the employment of professionals by bureaucracies gave vent to the underlying structural conflict between "occupational and administrative principles" of organizing. Theoreticians predicted that this conflict would lead to heightened alienation and dissatisfaction among bureaucratically employed professionals. However, researchers repeatedly uncovered little of the anticipated discontent (Scott 1965; Miller 1968; Hall 1968; Ritti 1971).

Conflict between professions and organizations attracted renewed attention in the late 1970s when Marxist scholars of the labor process began to suggest that many, if not all, professions were well on the road to "deprofessionalization" (Haug 1973, 1975; Toren 1975; Kraft 1978; Greenbaum 1979; McKinlay 1982). Paralleling Braverman's (1974) description of the deskilling of craft work, deprofessionalization theorists argued that organizational employment enabled capitalists to increase their power over the professional work force by effectively stripping professionals of their ability to control their work. Deprofessionalization theory typically predicted that the power and autonomy of professionals would decline sharply as professions became more embedded in organizations.

There can be no doubt that professional work since the World War II has become increasingly bound to organizational contexts. As Derber and Schwartz note in their contribution to this volume, from 1931 to 1980 self-employment among American physicians fell from 80% to approximately 50%. Similarly, less than one-third of the lawyers in the United States now work as private practitioners, whereas in 1950 over 50% were so employed (Spangler 1986). However, the migration of established professions into organizational settings explains only part of the change. In recent years, complex organizations have actually given birth to numerous new occupations, many of which have the trappings of professionalism (Abbott 1988). Organizationally-generated professions

include such diverse groups as psychiatrists, financial managers, librarians, computer programmers, operations researchers, forensic pathologists, and a seemingly endless array of health care occupations.

While debate over the consequences of the organizational employment of professionals has sometimes been intense, surprisingly little effort has been devoted to specifying the relations that actually exist between organizations and occupations. Organizational theorists, in particular, have almost completely ignored occupational phenomena, even though the interplay between occupation and organization clearly constitutes a central dynamic in the work lives of many individuals (Van Maanen and Barley 1984). By comparison, occupational sociologists have shown somewhat greater interest in the intersection between occupations and organizations. Nevertheless, with several notable exceptions (Starr 1982; Blau 1984; Spangler 1986; Nelson 1988; Derber, Schwartz, and Magrass 1990) few occupational sociologists have examined the phenomenon empirically. Consequently, recent volumes on professions and organizations largely reiterate or recast arguments that were prominent in the 1960s (Raelin 1985, Von Glinow 1988).

The lack of research and, by extension, the paucity of empirically grounded theory on organizations and occupations have left unanswered questions that are critical for understanding the social organization of work in post-industrial economies. Under what conditions are organizations likely to bureaucratize professional tasks? What types of tasks are most likely to be affected by such bureaucratization and how do occupations adjust to such changes? Conversely, what forces have transformed organizations into breeding grounds for new occupations? How are organizations affected when they employ large numbers of professionals? What dynamics occur when the boundaries between occupation and organization begin to blur?

Questions such these are grist for the papers in this volume. Our aim in assembling the papers has been to stimulate researchers and theoreticians to examine more closely the intersection between organizations and occupations. Like the authors of these papers, we believe that it is no longer wise for organizational and occupational sociology to develop as independent areas of theory and research. In fact, to continue to do so may mean that our understanding of the workplace will become increasingly unrealistic.

### **Breaking With Tradition**

Readers familiar with the sociological literature on the professions will immediately notice that the papers assembled here diverge significantly from previous work in several respects. Whereas much of the existing literature on the professions has been directly or indirectly concerned with how to decide when an occupation deserves to be called a profession, the papers in this volume largely dispense with such definitional issues. In part, the lack of concern with categorization may reflect the fact that a number of the authors investigate occupational groups whose status as a profession has never been disputed: medicine, law, and accounting. However, for most of the authors the difference seems to be rooted in more than a felicitous choice of subject matter.

In sharp contrast to previous work on professions and professionalization, the authors in this volume seem more willing to adopt a common language notion of what constitutes a profession. Abbott (this volume, p. 18) explicitly champions the value of a common language approach:

... one could start by discussing exactly what a profession is. But the numbers of possible definitions are overwhelming. And moreover, since the term "profession" is more an honorific than a technical one, any apparently technical definition will be rejected by those who reject its implied judgments about their favorite professions or non-professions. To start with a definition is thus not to start at all.

By adopting common language notions, Abbott can free himself to count midwives and matchmakers among the professions (at least during some historical periods), Perin can subsume marketing and financial specialists beneath the coveted moniker, and Sitkin and Sutcliffe can simply sidestep the issue of whether modern pharmacists deserve to call themselves members of a profession. Whalley goes so far as to examine what the term "professional" might actually signify in the everyday context of engineering. By avoiding the taxonomic obsessions

that have for so long mired research on professionalism, the authors gain the freedom to posit new frameworks and to focus their attention on heretofore unexamined dynamics.

A second feature that distinguishes many of the papers in this volume from earlier work on organizations and occupations is an unwillingness to assume that the relationship between professions and organizations is necessarily conflictual: A number of the authors imply that relations between professions and organizations might well be symbiotic. For instance, Zucker suggests that bureaucratic forms of organizing focus concern on efficiency, while professional forms of organizing primarily concern issues of effectiveness. Professional institutions may, therefore, moderate the inherent weaknesses of bureaucratic institutions and thereby strengthen an organization. As Sitkin and Sutcliffe's analysis indicates, bureaucratic criteria of efficiency and professional criteria of effectiveness may lead to precisely the same structural and behavioral outcomes. However, as Tolbert and Stern argue, these criteria may also give rise to different structural arrangements within the same organization. Such analyses serve to remind researchers that the degree of conflict between organizational and occupational control is an empirical question, whose scope requires careful specification.

Finally, a third distinction that characterizes most, though not all, of the papers in the volume is the notion that professionalism is best understood as an institutional form or a cultural template for organizing work. As such, professionalism is not viewed as the hallmark of an exclusive class of occupations, nor is professionalization simply thought to be the political process by which occupations obtain some cherished social status. Rather, professionalism is a cultural resource and professionalization is the process whereby an occupationally based template becomes legitimated as the primary principle for organizing a particular set of work activities.

### **Professionalism as an Institution**

Because Abbott and Torres most explicitly advocate the institutional perspective, we have grouped their papers together in Part I. Abbott suggests that *professionalism* represents one of several forms through which societies preserve and utilize expertise. Professionalism entails the embodiment of expertise in individuals. Alternative forms include *commodification*, the encoding of expertise in machines and other material objects, and *bureaucratization*, the embedding of expertise in an organized division of labor. Abbott envisions a dynamic environment in which the dominant institutional form in a particular domain may shift as conditions change and posits sets of conditions that favor one form over another. Moreover, according to Abbott, institutional solutions are rarely complete: Most domains of expertise evidence some mixture of commodification, bureaucratization, and professionalization.

Taking a different approach, Torres argues that the underlying rationale for professionalism is society's need for the effective delivery of critical services and emphasizes the role of state support in determining the institution's strength within an occupational domain. In this regard, Torres departs less significantly from previous work on the professions than does Abbott. Nevertheless, like Abbott, Torres envisions an environment in which shifting conditions alter the centrality of certain tasks for social welfare, the perceived complexity of those tasks, and hence, the viability of professionalism as an institutional solution within a given domain of activity.

### **The Bureaucratization of Occupations**

Viewing professionalism as a cultural template whose impact on specific areas of work may vary over time shifts attention away from professions as things-in-themselves and opens up the possibility of studying two broad processes that meld organizational and occupational forms of organizing. The first is the *bureaucratization of an occupation*. We use "bureaucratization" in its broadest sense to mean the creation of an increasingly formalized division of labor that is subject to imperative coordination. Occupations become bureaucratized when specialization leads to an enduring division of labor among an occupation's members (Abbott's internal DOELs) and to the creation of formal organizations as mechanisms for integrating specialists.

The bureaucratization of occupations spawns organizations that are staffed and administered primarily by members of a single occupation, although other occupational groups may serve in adjunct positions. Examples include law firms, accounting firms, architectural firms, and consulting firms. Such organizations, which represent central corporate actors in modern society, have increased markedly over the last three decades, in absolute numbers as well as in average scale. Despite their prominence in the contemporary population of organizations, organizations of professionals have been largely ignored by organizational sociologists and little is known about whether research based on nonprofessional organizations is applicable to such organizations. The papers Part II examine organizations created by the bureaucratization of occupations.

Based on intensive interviews with doctors, lawyers, and consultants employed in a variety of work settings, Derber and Schwartz address the question of whether the bureaucratization of professional work has created the "mandarin class" of experts predicted by a number of post-industrial theorists, or whether it has led to the proletarianization of the professional work force anticipated by most Neo-Marxist theorists. The authors conclude that neither perspective captures the multifaceted reality of work in a professional bureaucracy. An important implication of their analysis is that we are unlikely to understand the relationship between organization and occupation if we rely on theories whose ideology is stronger than their empiricism.

Like Abbott and Torres, Tolbert and Stern explicitly examine the intersection between organization and occupation from an institutional perspective. Tolbert and Stern argue that the institution of professionalism pertains to very specific and circumscribed domains of action, in particular, the techniques and evaluation of performance. Consequently, they reason that the institution of professionalism should only challenge bureaucratic institutions in those areas where the norms of professionalism specifically apply. Their analysis of formal decision-making structures in large law firms provides support for this argument.

Finally, Fichman and Levinthal's analysis of factors affecting the maintenance of relations among accounting firms and corporate clients extends both traditional studies of professional-client relations and research on interorganizational relations. Fichman and Levinthal recognize that professional-client relationships increasingly involve corporate rather than individual actors. In this context, they observe, clients are likely to have as much or more power than the professional parties to the relationship. This observation stands in sharp contrast to traditional views of professional power. However, Fichman and Levinthal also point out that the special knowledge controlled by a professional firm limits the client's ability to effectively monitor and evaluate the firm's performance. Consequently, the maintenance and dissolution of ties between professional firms and clients are unlikely to mirror precisely the dynamics of other types of relations that have been the focus of most studies of interorganizational ties.

### **The Occupationalization of Organizations**

The second process through which organizations and occupations are fused is the *occupationalization of organizations*. We prefer "occupationalization" to "professionalization" because the former does not carry the latter's theoretical baggage. The occupationalization of organizations involves vesting authority over particular organizational functions or domains in established or fledgling occupational groups.

There are numerous examples of this phenomenon in contemporary organizations. In universities, for example, personnel decisions involving professors are typically controlled by the faculty, who utilize norms and standards of the academic profession in making such decisions. In hospitals, doctors have traditionally demanded primary authority over organizational policies directly involving patient care. Similarly, the organization of work in professional enclaves, such as legal services units, research and development labs, and marketing departments of large corporations, is often based on occupationally-defined standards and practices.

The process of occupationalization is an important aspect of the progressive rationalization of organizations in contemporary societies (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1983), reflecting the efforts of business and government to bring increasingly specialized knowledge to bear in organizational problem-solving. However,

the implications of this process have been almost completely ignored by organizational research. The papers in Part III address issues involving both the sources and the consequences of the occupationalization of organizations.

Zucker notes that professional enclaves enable organizations to accomplish tasks for which bureaucratic forms of organizing are poorly suited. In particular, the employment of professionals allows an organization access to networks for evaluating the performance of tasks that are too complex and specialized for administration evaluation. In this regard, Zucker's theoretical claims parallel Tolbert and Stern's. Professional networks also provide pathways for the diffusion of information and intelligence that might not otherwise penetrate the organization's boundaries. For instance, the employment of professionals is likely to provide organizations with access to technical information that could not be purchased on the open market even if nonprofessionals were aware of its existence and pertinence.

As Whalley's analysis of engineering in British, French, and American contexts illustrates, the degree to which an organization becomes occupationalized depends upon cultural and historical idiosyncracies. Engineering is far more "professionalized" in France and the United States than it is in Britain, largely because of differences in cultural context and the role that universities have played in the national systems of education. Consequently, the salience of engineering's occupational identity varies across cultures. Despite these cross-cultural differences, Whalley suggests that, at least in the case of engineering, occupationalization entails the creation of a group of "trusted workers" who are perceived to be (and who are treated as if they were) different from manual workers as well as management.

Finally, by bringing to the study of occupations and organizations a concern with environmental variation, Bacharach, Bamberger, and Conley provide a dynamic framework for examining the consequences of occupationalization. The authors argue that bureaucratic institutions are likely to dominate work in professional enclaves when the industry or organization experiences decline and when the labor market provides professionals with little mobility. However, when the labor market grants professionals considerable mobility and when the industry and organization experience growth, professional institutions are likely to dominate bureaucratic institutions. Unlike typical contingency theorists, Bacharach et al. argue that the relative power of professional and bureaucratic institutions oscillates through time as the economy cycles through periods of munificence and scarcity. Thus, the upshots of occupationalization are unlikely to remain fixed even within the context of a single organization.

### **Grounding Institutions in Action**

The papers in Part IV deal with organization-occupation relations at the level of the individual practitioner. As such, the papers serve to ground the institutional forces discussed above in the context of everyday life. Like most previous work on the bureaucratic employment of professionals, the analyses in this part are concerned with the contours of professional work in "heteronomous" organizations, those under the administrative control of nonprofessionals. However, unlike previous research, they suggest how organizational and occupational dictates can be reconciled by practicing professionals.

Perin's ethnographic analysis of attitudes toward working at home underscores the problems of attempting to draw overly sharp distinctions between orientations traditionally associated with bureaucratic control, on the one hand, and professional control, on the other. The difficulty arises because the requirements of bureaucratic control have become taken-for-granted understandings concerning employment relations that are lodged in the larger culture. Perin's data suggest that cultural interpretations of one's physical presence at specific locations in time and space are shared by professionals and administrators alike. Professionals find the notion of doing one's work at home as difficult to accept as do managers who have administrative authority over the professionals' work. Consequently, the inability of professionals to utilize telecomputing as a means of gaining greater autonomy is less the product of direct organizational control than it is of cultural hegemony.

Sitkin and Sutcliffe's paper also challenges traditional thought on the manner in which organizationally embedded professionals accommodate to the simultaneous demands of organization and profession. Whereas

most previous work suggests that bureaucratically employed professionals abdicate to organizational dictates, Sitkin and Sutcliffe's research suggests that under appropriate circumstances each institution demands similar behavior, albeit for different reasons. Consequently, to assume that bureaucratically embedded professionals are eventually coopted by the organization may be far too brittle an interpretation of reality.

### **Issues for Future Research**

Although the papers in this volume raise important questions and open up fresh avenues for research and theory on the intersection between organizations and occupations, clearly much work remains to be done. In particular, the development of theory and research on the process of occupationalization is likely to be an important key to understanding the dynamics of both organizational and occupational change. There are at least two aspects of occupationalization that deserve greater theoretical attention.

The first is the path by which organizations become occupationalized. Occupationalization is typically motivated by organizations' needs for continuous access to specialized expertise. When environments shift or when internal changes occur (e.g., with the passage of new legislation or substantial growth), it may become economically viable and even necessary for organizations to internalize specialized expertise that was once purchased on the open market. Under such conditions, organizations are likely to import members of established occupations. Recent examples of the importation of occupational groups include the rise of legal services within modern business corporations and the creation of medical units within highly labor-intensive firms.

On the other hand, occupationalization may occur when organizational adaptation or change results in new tasks or activities that are not clearly located within the purview of an existing occupational group. When the knowledge and expertise required to carry out these tasks becomes sufficiently complex and esoteric, the training of personnel may migrate from corporate contexts to university settings, thereby creating conditions for the formation of occupational identities. Recently recognized occupational groups that have emerged out of organizational contexts include financial managers, public relations experts, actuaries, systems analysts, and marketing specialists. With time, these occupational groups typically gain cultural authority over the execution of their tasks, and in the end, organizations largely abdicate a significant amount of control to the very experts they have created.

The different paths to occupationalization may lead to different consequences for organizations. When occupational groups that have previously had a more or less autonomous existence are imported, one might reasonably expect their norms to conflict with bureaucratic standards and procedures. In contrast, the norms of occupations whose origins lie within a bureaucratic context are likely to be generally compatible with bureaucratic requirements and objectives. Thus, the distinction suggests a number of questions for research. Does the nature of the occupationalization process influence whether organizational relations will be symbiotic or conflictual? Similarly, does the nature of the occupationalization process shape the system of social control that emerges in an organization?

A second important and neglected aspect of occupationalization concerns the degree to which an occupation comes to dominate organizational decision making once it has established a foothold inside the organization's boundaries. At one extreme stand occupationally-controlled organizations such as universities and hospitals, whose general policies and administrative actions are heavily shaped by the standards of a single occupational group. Since the early 1900s, most colleges and universities have come to delegate administrative responsibility for major personnel and many "production" decisions (e.g., the setting of curricula, graduation standards, etc.) to members of the professoriate. Likewise, the operating policies and procedures of most hospitals closely reflect the concerns and criteria of the medical profession.

At the other extreme are occupationally-controlled enclaves that exist within business corporations. Such enclaves often have the status of a formal subunit and are granted legitimate authority over a circumscribed organizational domain as well as considerable freedom from bureaucratic control. However, the influence of occupational standards is clearly restricted by the subunit's boundaries. Beyond these boundaries, the operating policies and decision-making criteria of the organization cannot be identified with any particular occupational



group. Examples of such occupational enclaves include molecular biologists pursuing basic research within pharmaceutical and chemical firms, sociologists and psychologists responsible for in-house organizational research, and economists who carry out market analyses and financial forecasting in large business firms.

The distinction also raises important questions for further research. Under what conditions will occupationalization result in an occupation's domination of an organization, and when will it lead to the formation of occupational enclaves? Is this simply a matter of the occupational composition of the organization, or are other factors involved? And how does the degree of occupational domination affect the nature of organizational-occupational relations?

In order to pursue these and similar questions, several knotty problems of research will have to be confronted. If students of organizations and occupations were to finally adopt a common language definition of a profession and admit that modern organizations have become fertile breeding grounds for new occupational groups, they would immediately confront unlimited opportunities for theorizing, but at the same time find themselves with very little data on which to draw. At present we have next to no empirical information on such occupational groups as financial managers, actuaries, personnel administrators, marketers, public relations specialists, development officers, systems analysts, and so forth. Without historical information on how such occupations came into being, ethnographic data on the nature of their work, and statistical information on their members' characteristics, we are poorly positioned to develop valid theories of how occupations and organizations interact. Hence, much remains to be done in terms of expanding our knowledge of occupations beyond the handful of health and law-related professions that have traditionally been the focus of occupational studies.

In order to develop our understanding of both organizations and occupations, it is necessary to break down the traditional boundaries between organizational and occupational sociology, and to develop a synthetic framework that will allow us to explore more fully the complexities of work structures in contemporary societies. The collection of papers in this volume is intended to be one step in that direction.

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