



Please cite the source as:

Fernández, J. (2001). Elements that reinforce "profession" as a concept. Notes for reflection. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, 3 (2). Retrieved month day, year, from: <http://redie.ens.uabc.mx/vol3no2/contents-fernandez.html>

Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

Vol.3, No. 2, 2001

Elements that Reinforce "Profession" as a Concept. Notes for Reflection

Elementos que consolidan al concepto profesión. Notas para su reflexión

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(Received: July 4, 2001; accepted for publishing: August 21, 2001)

Abstract

The concept of *profession* has been bound to the evolution and development of societies; however, it is difficult to have one sole definition of the term, since there is a very thin lines between what is an occupation, and what is a profession. Still, However, it is possible to identify some elements, such as the high level of educational training, the organizational structure, the link with power structures, status, continual up-dating and the search for autonomy, as factors defining an activity as a profession.

Key words: Profession, professional training, professional status.

Resumen

El concepto profesión ha estado ligado a la evolución y desarrollo de las sociedades; pero es difícil tener una definición única de la profesión, ya que existe una frontera difusa entre lo que es una ocupación y una profesión. Sin embargo, es posible identificar algunos elementos como la formación educativa de alto nivel, la estructura organizativa, la vinculación con las estructuras de poder, el estatus, la actualización continua y la búsqueda de autonomía como factores que inciden en la determinación de una actividad determinada como una profesión.

Palabras clave: Profesión, formación profesional, estatus profesional.

Introduction

During the past year, in attending national academic activities and forums related to the subject of *profession*, I have been able to observe that when allusion is made to it, it is exclusively related to studying for a BA degree or a professional major, and focuses mainly on the process of training that takes place within institutions of higher education. This is because *profession* goes beyond the school setting, since its development has been permanently linked to the evolution of societies, where it has assumed characteristics that allow it to be considered an institution within the social structure to which it belongs. In this sense, and considering that today, societal changes influenced by the formation of new economic blocs are transforming and enabling new conditions and features of the world of professions, it was considered appropriate to reflect on how the concept of profession is formed, and what its relationship is with some elements that have contributed to the study.

Brief historical review of the concept *profession*

From an etymological point of view, the term *profession* contains an idea of selflessness, because “to profess” does not mean just to exercise knowledge or a skill, but also to believe and publicly confess a belief (Gomez and Tenti, 1989). The word *profession* comes from the Latin *professio*, *-onis*, which means the act and effect of professing. The common use of the concept has different meanings, among them, ‘employment, school or office which a person has exercised publicly; the declaration or public confession of something (the profession of faith, a political ideology, etc.)’ In this sense, a profession is defined as an ongoing activity that provides a livelihood and that determines entry into a professional group. Overall, a profession has been as an occupation that monopolizes a series of private activities on the basis of a wealth of abstract knowledge, which enables those who perform it considerable freedom of action, and that has important social consequences.

The term *profession* has evolved over time, and has been the product of historical development, which has established and renovated mechanisms of various kinds, up to its arrival at the modern processes known today. The background on the

origins of this concept is found in ancient Hebrew texts, where it is noted that this word was used in connection with priestly functions, business in the service of a king or a royal official, since the word means *to send* or *ship*, which represents a mission. However, the concept in the current sense cannot go back beyond the pre-industrial era as a product of industrialization and the division of labor.

Nineteenth-century theorists believed the professions were a form of what Tocqueville called “intermediary corporations”—agencies through which a new social order could be established in place of traditional society. For Max Weber (1901), the profession was linked to religion in the Christian tradition, since the act of professing is related to the willingness to consecrate oneself to God, to obey a superior being, with a high content of asceticism, surrender and suffering.

Moreover, the expansion of technical knowledge, population explosion and growth of urban centers in the nineteenth century during the Industrial Revolution helped to change the existing social organization, advocating the creation of specialized professional tasks (Barron 1996). These factors made it so that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of the professional was incorporated as a product of the changes brought about by industrialization. In this context, in 1915, Flexner suggested that to recognize this field it was necessary to take into account the implication of intellectual operations, which acquire their material from science and instruction. He also points out that the handling of this material is with a definite and practical end, which has a communicable educational technique; it leads to organization among its members and becomes ever more altruistic (Gomez and Tenti, 1989).

In the thirties, Carr-Saunders and Willson (1933) reported that an occupation reached the status of a profession when a type of activity was not exercised except through the acquisition of a controlled training, submission to rules and standards of conduct between members and nonmembers, and adherence to an ethic of social service. In 1953, Cogan made reference to a profession’s having an ethical obligation to provide altruistic services to the client; his definition was based on the theoretical designations of some areas of specific knowledge and skills (Pou, 1986).

Later studies in the sixties defined profession as when there was a specific body of knowledge acting in an organized social reality. Wilensky (1964) established that a profession is a special form of occupational organization based on a systematic body of knowledge acquired through formal training. He also confirms that an activity becomes regarded as a profession when it exceeds the five stages of the process of professionalization, where the work becomes a full-time occupation as a consequence of the social necessity for the emergence and expansion of the labor market. Schools are created for the education and training of new professionals. It is the professional association that defines professional profiles; the profession is regulated, thus ensuring a monopoly over knowledge and professional practice. A code of ethics is adopted with the aim of preserving “genuine professionals” through its use (Pacheco, 1994).

In this context, Millerson (1964) stated that every profession must meet certain characteristics that would measure the degree of professionalization of different occupations, since professionals should have a high salary, high social status and autonomy in their work (Burrage, 1990). From a functionalist perspective, he explained this privileged position by saying that professions perform functions that are socially valued, such as using skills based on theoretical knowledge; offering education and training in these skills; guaranteeing competence in individuals due to exams; having a code of conduct for ensuring professional integrity; carrying out a service for the public good; making possible the existence of an association that would organize its members.

Meanwhile, Schein (1970) established that the professions constitute sets of occupations that have developed a system of rules derived from their special role in society, in which the amateur is different from the professional, since s/he is devoted full-time to an occupation that is his/her main source of income (Gomez and Tenti, 1989). It is assumed that the person who has a profession has a source of motivation, and continuously exercises it; besides having a specialized body of knowledge and skills acquired over a long education/training period. The person who has a degree makes decisions for a client on general principles, offers a professional service based on the client's needs with a high spirit of service. Furthermore, professionals form professional associations with the aim of defining criteria for admission, educational levels, degrees or entrance exams, study programs and areas of jurisdiction.

In this same decade, Moore and Freidson (1970) added that from a set of structural and attitudinal dimensions a profession can be seen as a full-time occupation, characterized by the presence of professionals within an organization that allows the mutual identification of common interests and formal knowledge, and in which there are accepted standards and appropriate models for identification among colleagues (Machado, 1991). Furthermore, professionals have an orientation toward service, and are autonomous; they see the profession as a group of people who perform a set of activities that provide their main source of income, in exchange for compensation. Johnson (1972) reported that, in order for an authentic profession to exist, it is necessary for those who practice the occupation to form a relatively-homogeneous group. Similarly, Parkin (1979) says that strategies of exclusion are followed so as to restrict access to professions, using educational requirements that may have little relation to the difficulty of the professional work (Burrage, 1990). Accordingly, the professions can establish these strategies because the State gives accredited members the right to practice certain occupations.

Moreover, in the eighties, a profession was defined as an occupation regulating itself through systematic and compulsory training in a university setting, based on specialized and technical knowledge, and oriented more toward service than toward pecuniary gain, as enshrined in its code of ethics (Starr, 1982). In this context, a profession was considered to be a sociocultural phenomenon which involved a set of knowledge and skills, traditions, customs and practices that

depended on the economic, social and cultural context in which it arose and developed.

Traditionally, the profession has been a privileged form of activity and the basis of a socioeconomic category characterized by a diversity of tasks and high levels of income, social status and prestige. Present-day professions are structured based on a segmentation of knowledge production and of their own practice in answer to the need to regulate and control the forms of exercising professional skills, and seeking to legalize the school as the only valid way to access knowledge. The professions have been considered as autonomous social structures in the sense that they are formally established and legitimized, and not only by the historically-constituted set of forms and systems of social organization.

Other important elements of the profession are its intrinsic legitimacy, validity and function, which are framed by the historical characteristics of the society in which it has emerged and developed. Its specific modes of training, reproduction, exclusion, certification and assessment depend on the conditions under which it arises, the interests of those who promote it, and the political power of its members. Consequently, the profession, as a structural unit of modern society, condenses processes and elements of social, political and ideological reality, in that it is circumscribed, being formally established and legitimized by the social sector that has constituted it.

A new concept of profession is given in the work of Cleaves (1985), who holds that professions are occupations requiring specialized knowledge, high-level educational training, control over job content, self-organization, autoregulation, altruism, a spirit of community service and high ethical standards. This leads to the opinion that generally, the profession would ensure having a career through an activity in which the knowledge of the professional, in addition to being exercised, would amplify itself cumulatively, thereby enriching its practitioner. Moreover, some authors like Brunner and Flisfich (1989), believe that the professions are essential, both because they possess technical knowledge, but also for the values they represent (Pacheco, 1994).

In the context of globalization, the professions have been strongly influenced by new technologies, which facilitate the emergence of new occupations, and the reorientation of others now existing. In this sense, Dingwall (1996) points out that professions, as they are now, retain from the past only a symbolic continuity with the relevant occupational group in the Middle Ages. In this context, and given the conditions that new labor market systems have established, a profession is currently defined as, from one discipline, a group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards set by themselves; who are accepted by society as the possessors of special knowledge and skills obtained in a high-level learning process of renowned and derivative research, and who are prepared to exercise their knowledge and skills in the interest of other individuals.

Inseparable from the current definition of *profession* is an ethical code that directs the activities of each profession. This code requires a conduct and practice beyond the personal moral obligations of an individual. Those who practice a profession define and demand high standards of behavior with respect to services provided to the public and dealings with professional bodies. Also, these codes, imposed by the profession, are recognized and accepted by the community.

Brief historical review of the concept of vocational training

The structure of the concept of profession has been linked directly to the concept of vocational training. Vocational training is defined as the set of social processes for the preparation and shaping of the subject, referring to specific purposes for a subsequent performance in the workplace. Moreover, the educational process taking place in institutions of higher education, oriented so that students gain knowledge, skills, attitudes, cultural and ethical values, are contained in a professional profile and meet the requirements for a particular exercise of a profession. In this sense, it is imperative to study the historical development of professional training to contribute to its modification as well (Marin, 1997).

The history of university vocational training is found in the birth of medieval universities, the product of the intellectual awakening of the twelfth century, and among other factors, some like the termination of the feudal system, the formation of municipal institutions, the increase in cultural exchanges and trade, the birth of a certain type of financial capitalism, the emergence of the bourgeois society and the birth of the secular approach (Garcia, 1991). In this way, the need for professional training that would respond to the exigencies of developmental needs of society was linked to the guilds of the Middle Ages (Barron, 1996).

Within the first schools that preceded the medieval universities, we find the school of Salerno, which had a great reputation in the training of practicing physicians. In its early years, this institution was considered a strategic point where there were protesting ecclesiastical and civil forces, since the intention was to achieve a secular nature in its composition. Subsequently, universities were established in Bologna, Paris, Padua and Oxford, among other places. The medieval universities included several schools, several disciplines and a plurality of teachers and students. Few of them had all the schools, but in all, the propaedeutics of art, theology, civil law, canon law and medicine were taught.

From the formal point of view, in these institutions it was important to obtain the *locata licentia docendi* or universal recognition of degrees in order to exercise them anywhere in the world. At that time, what we know today as a university was called a *studium* (study), while the word *universitas* was used as a synonym for corporation, which could be of any nature, university or not. Hence the word is accompanied by a genitive which determined the nature of the corporation; for example, the *magistorum universitas* was the corporation of masters. Similarly, the innumerable medieval labor unions had their universities.

Moreover, in our country, the training of professionals has taken various directions since the nineteenth century. Outstanding among these are: a) liberal training, based on a more comprehensive and humanistic-spiritual vision of individual development; b) modernizing vocational and technocratic training, in which converged the model of liberal professions, the expansion of the state apparatus and the demand for the incorporation of scientific content in higher education, favoring its professional sense; c) technical-scientific training, which dissociated the university training from the political and cultural; and d) production-technical training, through which there has been attempted the implantation of neoliberal policies without government recognition of the history, processes, practices and concepts of the educational subsystems developed (Barron, 1996).

In virtue of the above, we can say that university training has had a particular history; legal, administrative and academic rules and criteria; an orientation of its education and educational and disciplinary training, and an academic behavior that characterizes them. An example of this is obviously the medical profession, whose development within Mexican society has allowed it to be linked with the State in a very particular manner. Currently, the professional training is conducted in an academic framework under institutional requirements that regulate the activities considered necessary and relevant; and endorsing the education offered, by issuing certificates and diplomas.

Relationship between profession and state

In countries like England and the United States, the evolution of professions has been independent of government policy (Cleaves, 1985), and the State is only involved in the regulation of professions, generally in alliance with their interests but also, in other cases, in opposition to them (Smith, 1993). State involvement allows political power to be identified behind the legislation governing the profession, primarily in certain liberal professions (medicine, law, architecture, accounting), since the development of these professions is linked both with aspects of political power and with technology and culture (Collins, 1989). It can be affirmed that for the State itself, the autoregulation is sufficiently satisfactory.

Referring to the relationship between State and profession, Light (1995) speaks of control models based on the assumption that this relationship exceeds the simple concept of a market relationship between employers and employees, or between producers or consumers. It expresses the relationship within a political framework where groups are involved in an ongoing and constant balancing of powers (Nigenda, 1995). In this proposal, the historical component is basic, since it assumes that the control model is the result of qualitative changes occurring in the interaction between the participants in a given period of time. In this sense, the State/profession relationship, and therefore, the control model is established on two axes.

The first revolves around the concept of dominance established by Freidson (1970), which in its original version meant not only professionals' control over their own technical work but also over the financial aspects, institutional structures, alternative powers, and cultural charisma, including the social construction of reality. The second axis revolves around the placement of professionals in the labor market, where there are both politico-social and economic criteria. At one end of the first axis appears professional dominion, while at the opposite end, appears the dominion of the State (Nigenda, 1995). Based on the above, we can establish that a profession is a self-regulating community having an exclusive power, normally backed by the State, to educate new members or admit them into their practices, reserving the right to judge the professional performance of its own members.

Ongoing professional education

Apparently, the need for ongoing education for professionals was born in the late nineteenth century in German universities, and involved Humboldt's ideal of unity around research and education. Later, this model passed along the idea to American universities, in which it was adapted to local conditions and idiosyncrasies. In 1965, in the UNESCO, for the first time the subject of continuing and permanent education was dealt with, and in 1970, during the "International Year of Education", the same agency proposed that ongoing education should be the cornerstone of educational policy.

Ongoing education, which properly begins when formal education ends, emerged after re-expressing and discussing the traditional notion of education, which had not noticed the imbalance that occurs between the knowledge acquired by a student in the process of training, and that obtained as a result of progress in various professional disciplines. In Mexico, the antecedents of ongoing education can be seen in the late seventies, when institutions of higher education began making their first efforts in the field of professional updating. By the eighties, due to the increase of such programs at universities and non-university training centers, there was great interest in professional-updating activities.

In the different professional fields, there was growing, in an obvious and generalized manner, the demand, both individually and as part of different work environments, for overcoming the obsolescence of the professional's knowledge, presented as a consequence of the time's societal changes toward technological patterns and the accelerated development of scientific research. This need led to the incorporation of the concept of professional updating as an essential element in the development of professions. In fact, the very term 'ongoing education' for professions, became synonymous with courses, conferences, etc.

In the traditional way, universities have been responsible for providing the initial professional knowledge, since for a time they were only ones playing the role of agents of change and leaders in what was related to setting the standards under

which professions should be run. However, in the last decade, and more after the enactment of the Free Trade Treaties, associations and schools for professionals have also taken this responsibility, by offering professional updating programs for their members through various channels.

The profession and professional organization

Since man has existed, the tendency to get together in groups has been innate. History reports that the first men formed small groups to meet their need to organize for survival. If we consider that we understand by *trade union*, the organization of a group of people characterized by the continuing need for communication and interaction, in which its members know the role each must play and the interdependence of the various group responsibilities, one can understand why the professional association/union has constituted a tactical element in the professions' struggle to obtain greater autonomy and social recognition.

Being unionized means responsibility through which the member is committed to work and defend the interests of the group. The importance of being organized represents for any union, the possibility of members' raising their voices to formulate their goals, lobby as a group, protect their interests and find approaches and solutions to specific problems (Verdugo, 1991). The trade union is linked directly to the development of existing professions. The fact that an individual develops in a pluralistic society involves interacting with groups different in interests, characteristics, purposes and goals.

As a result, an individual tends to relate to others in groups or societies that organize themselves freely for the management and achievement of some common goal, with the aim of being in a better position to defend themselves before the society in general, and before the state and others in particular. In the thirties, Carr-Saunders and Williams established, as motivations that lead individuals to form professional associations: a) the definition of a line of demarcation between the skilled and the unskilled b) the maintaining of high levels of professional character and honorable, c) the elevation of the status of the professional group, and d) the desire of the profession to be recognized by society as the only persons fully competent to perform their specific task.

The origin of the school is instituted as an association of collective and public usefulness because it establishes the duties of its members to society and the State, providing them protection and promoting their moral and cultural elevation, as well as defining their obligations and their rights. In general, schools of the different professions follow the model established centuries ago by European trade unions. These corporations are characterized by defending and regulating the satisfaction of private interests, and exercise a public authority, as being a group of people who share common interests in connection with a trade, occupation and profession, and seeking access to certain rights of private and public character (Ponton, 1997).

There are two models of professional association, one represented by the Anglo-Saxon countries—the U. S. and England—where the associations are independent of the state; and another developed under the protection of the State, as in the case of Mexico, in which professionals have adopted various forms of organization; one of these is the professional school. In view of the origin of professional associations, these groups would be expected to protect the interests of the profession, promote legislation that would regulate it, promote the development of its members and determine who may or may not practice the profession, among other activities.

However, in the case of Mexican professional associations and schools, these have been characterized by having their development under the shelter of the State, and seeking its protection to further the interests of the profession itself. The major groups have been linked to political parties, informal groups of individuals who owe allegiance to each other, university alumni associations, labor unions and groups having their own interest within the government agencies (Cleaves, 1985). In general terms, professional associations in Mexico do not define their field's core body of knowledge that should be taught in institutions of higher education. Neither do they establish regulatory policies for the profession, nor regulate admission to it. They do not moderate the personal initiatives or make job search easier. In general terms, these groups only offer opportunities for social expression, the obtaining of a certain prestige, acquisition of documentary material, and occasional participation in seminars or meetings.

The profession as viewed from the social stratification theory

Within the sociology of the professions, some authors (Freidson, 1970, Elliot, 1975) refer to the issue of professional income in a superficial manner, pointing it out as one of the characteristics of a profession, which has been constituted as one of the elements that has contributed to the acquisition of social and economic status by professional groups. In this sense, the study of professional income can be approached from the perspective of other thematic areas, such as economics of education, social stratification, social theory and the labor market, among others. This section will address more fully the perspective of social stratification.

The term social stratification was incorporated into the field of sociology in 1940. However, it should be noted that the origins of social stratification theory date back to the works of Marx, where he emphasizes the importance of the individual or group within the structure of a society.

Max Weber (1901) introduced his model of social stratification, based on the concepts of class and social stratum (the latter defined in terms of "honor" and "lifestyle"), a systematic and explicit differentiation needed in this theory. Weber noted that the social stratum, party or power were independent factors such as class, which for Marx, was the only independent factor.

Social differences become social stratification when people are classified hierarchically according to some criterion of inequality, whether it be income, wealth, power, prestige, age, ethnicity or any other characteristic; furthermore, there exists a multidimensional approach that has contributed to the development of the stratification theory, which has incorporated the prestige dimension and has considered what Weber called a political situation as a widespread social phenomenon occurring in all positions in the occupational structure of society (Parsons, 1949 , Davis and Moore 1945, cited by Barber, 1957). Prestige is the result of two factors: a values system and the functional importance of the roles within the framework of the occupational structure of a society. The functional significance depends on the relative ability of a role to produce an asset or service in the society.

Each of the productive roles of a society has a different functional significance for that society, and is valued at a higher or lower value, which is to say that it has more or less prestige. In every society and every historical period, the relative prestige that each productive role possesses may not be the same, but the variability may be as great as some of the society's ideological interpretations postulate. This variability is due to the fact that the same necessary function in a social system can be valued in different ways, according to the dominant values in different societies and eras. Furthermore, the different roles of a society offer different possibilities in terms of generating income and accumulating capital.

The theory of stratification, according to the functionalist approach, is the mechanism by which society encourages individuals to try to occupy the various positions that a complex social system requires. The functionalist theory holds that in a non-stratified society, the recompenses are relatively equal for all tasks, so that the positions that involve more work, more anxiety or deferral of rewards will not be occupied by the most competent people. Otherwise, the stratification system is conceived as a motivation system, in which the society encourages the most capable to perform the most difficult roles in order for society to function effectively. This theory also suggests that status is the most general and persistent stratification, where the rewards of economic nature and of power are not valued for themselves, but because they are symbolic indicators of high status.

North American sociologists have often argued that the type of class stratification found in other industrial societies is absent in the United States. For them, classification is based on different criteria, among which are: income, occupation, power, ethnicity, religion and education; individuals may have high status or prestige according to one of these criteria. Economic status can be determined by the volume or source of personal income; but economic status is not sufficient for social prestige. Some writers, like Ben-David (1974), indicate that a characteristic of the members of a profession is that they have a high salary, social status and autonomy in their work. They believe that this privileged position is obtained from the fact that professions carry out socially-valued functions (Abercrombie, 1998). From this perspective, a profession confers upon the one who practices it a prestige and a medium-high advantage in the social stratification system of almost

all societies, whether the profession is practiced as dependent employment or self-employment.

Studies on occupational prestige in Anglo-Saxon countries consistently show that professions having the greatest antiquity are still considered to have also the highest status (Elliot, 1975). It is assumed that those who choose the medical profession have, in varying degrees, the following motivations: weighing the social prestige and high income; finding an interesting occupation that seems to be a challenge; the pleasure of exercising their judgment and trying to do good. The commitment of professionals to their work depends on the rewards they receive, which include income, status, patients' esteem and appreciation, and the satisfaction of performing their jobs properly. Income has undeniably tended to become an important symbol of their success. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the status granted by the profession has clear links with the existing development process and with the participation of the State (Nigenda, 1995).

Finally, within the organized division of labor, and therefore, the diversification of activities by homogenous groups, a profession may be considered as a habitual and continuous occupation of an individual in a workplace. In this sense, the profession usually forms, and should form, the individual's economic basis, although success, prestige and professional authority are not necessarily linked to the total revenue earned through the practice of the profession.

Conclusions

Throughout this article, there have been recounted the arguments surrounding the construction of the profession as a concept, showing that its structure has been determined by the same general principles that lead to the integration of any kind of community consciousness (Collins, 1989). It can be seen that it is not difficult to define what a profession is in theory, but because of the versatility of the professions, at the fast pace of changes in the professional world and the growth of professionalization as a trend in many trades, the construction of the concept is an unfinished topic. We can see that professions are a particular kind of organization that possesses knowledge of itself and a special, distinctive culture. A profession, in general, shows the same spaces of variation in its consistency and power as cultural communities which are studied more conventionally: status groups made up of families and members of one race or religion.

The context of globalization and regionalization of professional services is conditioning a new model of professions for the twenty-first century, which will have to assume elements appropriate for a new society that changes from day to day. These changes are leading professions, for their development, to incorporate some aspects such as the accreditation of plans and curricula of higher education, certification and continuous updating of professionals, the association of schools and professional associations with higher-education institutions and flexibility for work, among other things.

Finally, the new professional culture promotes the need to take into consideration, besides national conditions, technological developments; international policies; communications; labor markets, both internal and external; the needs of the productive sector; and the requirements demanded by each society, in particular. These changes cause people who study for professions to have a constant need to update their conceptual and theoretical knowledge in order to find explanations for the changes that occur around the professional world.

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Translator: Lessie Evona York-Weatherman

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