PROFESSIONAL WORK

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF WORK

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PROFESSIONAL WORK: KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

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actors, semiotic practices, institutional logics, and spaces involved in the social organization of the paid labor of care for the elderly in the home. In times of shifting economic, social welfare, labor, migration and gender regimes, her study explores and uncovers the contested terrain on which US current home care system rests. Her research and teaching interests include the sociology of work, gender, and sexuality; politics of work; medical sociology and humanities; the body and the life course; culture; social and political theory; and the sociology of knowledge.

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Steven P. Vallas is a Professor of Sociology at Northeastern University in Boston. Most of his research is concerned with the transformation of work, struggles over

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Jane S. VanHeuvelen is a Contract Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. Her current research agenda involves a focus on the experience of contemporary healthcare workers and professionals, including studies of the well-being, daily work practices, social status and interactions of healthcare workers across occupational groups. Her work has appeared in *Social Science & Medicine*, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *Sociology of Development*, *Society and Mental Health,* and *Advances in Medical Sociology*.

INTRODUCTION: EXPERTISE AND THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF PROFESSIONAL WORK

Elizabeth H. Gorman and Steven P. Vallas

ABSTRACT

Although expert knowledge has never been more important, it faces mounting challenges to its validity and authority. In this introduction, we discuss the structural changes that have gripped the professions and undercut the ability of professional workers to exercise the authority they previously enjoyed. Digital technology and specialization, the erosion of autonomy within work organizations, depleted levels of income and prestige, and the rise of self-interested forms of professional practice have all worked to reduce the legitimacy of the professions, transforming the structure of professional work and its place within many advanced capitalist societies. In this context, we briefly describe the volume's chapters and their contributions to the growing and increasingly timely body of research on professional work and expertise..

Keywords: Professions; knowledge work; expertise; autonomy; social status; public service orientation

We live in an era when prominent public voices reject scientific conclusions about climate change, attack news reports as "fake news," and charge that political bias is corrupting the courts and higher education. A nagging sense that perhaps we can no longer tell just what is true or false, real or "fake," has created widespread unease, and we hear repeated expressions of doubt as to whether democracies can function when their constituents cannot agree on the facts.[1] These attacks on knowledge are implicitly rooted in challenges to the legitimacy of professional

authority. In today's complicated, specialized, and globalized world, everyday life increasingly depends on bodies of knowledge wielded by professionals who have met established criteria for expertise in particular areas. For some, this dependence on professionals is unsettling and provokes resentment. Neoliberalism on the right and various intellectual movements on the left have fanned the flames of this backlash and articulated rationales for it (Leicht, 2015). Yet, just as grievances alone do not produce a social movement without resources and political opportunities, resentment alone would not destabilize experts' legitimacy were it not for contemporaneous changes in the social organization of professional work that have made it more difficult for professionals to assert their authority.

During their "golden age" in the middle of the twentieth century, professional occupations demonstrated four hallmark characteristics: a coherent body of abstract yet practical knowledge; autonomy over the performance of their work; relatively high income and social status; and a "service orientation" – a normative orientation toward a set of values other than commercial success, such as justice or scientific truth, that were perceived to reflect the public interest (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). The bodies of knowledge that professionals deployed struck a balance between reliance on abstract professional judgment, on the one hand, and reliably successful practical application, on the other hand, that allowed them to gain exclusive control over services within their spheres of jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988; Wilensky, 1964). As self-employed practitioners or partners in small firms, often with little competition for clients, professionals were able to perform their work free of client, customer or bureaucratic control (Freidson, 1970). An era of lessened income inequality allowed professionals to stand near the high end of the distributions of income and social status (Goode, 1957; Larson, 1977). Cohesive local professional communities maintained and, to at least some extent, enforced professional norms and values through processes of informal social control (Freidson, 1960; Hall, 1948). Taken together, these characteristics enabled professionals to assert independent judgment relative to their clients and bolstered their legitimacy and authority more generally.[2] Since the late 1970s, however, professional occupations have exhibited dramatic change along all four dimensions. The nature of professional knowledge has been transformed, and professional autonomy, social standing, and adherence to a service orientation have all declined. As a result, professional expertise is increasingly vulnerable to challenge, its capacity to anchor social definitions of reality correspondingly weak.

STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES IN PROFESSIONAL WORK

Knowledge. Professional knowledge has been transformed in several ways. First, as bodies of expert knowledge have expanded, they have grown increasingly specialized, more concretely rooted in specific applications, and less capable of unifying broad swaths of work. One result has been the fracturing and fragmentation of the broad epistemic communities that professions previously maintained,

leaving practitioners less prepared to defend their profession's control over its entire knowledge base. For some professions, specialization has followed the business imperatives of clients or employers rather than the internal logic of the profession. A case in point is the clear differentiation of the legal profession into two "hemispheres" serving corporate and individual clients, respectively (Heinz & Laumann, 1982; Heinz, Nelson, Laumann, & Sandefur, 2006). Lawyers in each hemisphere not only practice different kinds of law, but also have few social ties to lawyers in the other domain.

New information and communication technologies surely play a role in the transformation of expert knowledge in several ways. On the one hand, new technologies have opened the door to new forms of knowledge, new methods of research, and new expert occupations; an example is the rise of "data scientists." On the other hand, as Haug (1975) predicted several decades ago, information technology facilitates the standardization and codification of knowledge. This can, in turn, lower some of the barriers that once impeded lay access to that knowledge, reducing the need for professional judgment in handling more routine problems. Increasingly sophisticated digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, natural language processing and language translation, even threaten to replace the work of many professionals, just as earlier waves of technological development replaced many administrative and middle-management jobs. Certainly, they have aided in its geographic redistribution.

Lastly, expert knowledge has also been destabilized from within, by intellectual movements within the academic worlds where it is produced and taught. Critical views of professional expertise see it as deeply influenced by professions' rational self-interest in establishing monopolies over the supply of services in specific "jurisdictions" (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977). Post-structural perspectives view formal knowledge as embodying and reproducing the hierarchical nature of the broader social order (Foucault, 1988), often constituting the very problems that formal knowledge claims to solve (see also Beck, 1992). For example, in the legal profession, critical race theorists have pointed to ways in which seemingly neutral laws operated to maintain the subjugation of African-Americans (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 1988). Post-positivist arguments point out the socially constructed nature of our knowledge and question our ability to form an understanding of any "objective" reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, Schütz, 1945). Although there is undoubted merit in these critiques, they have tended to undermine the authoritativeness of professional knowledge claims (Leicht, 2015). Most revealingly perhaps, the courts have adjusted the guidelines that govern the admissibility of expert opinion, recognizing the insufficiency of the professions in this regard. The *Frye* standard, established in 1923, had deferred to the judgment of professional associations. With the *Daubert* rulings of the 1990s, the courts required judges to serve as the gatekeepers of expertise, adjudicating between the conflicting claims that had grown endemic among professionals themselves (see Eyal, 2019, pp. 15–18).

Autonomy. Many professionals have seen their autonomy over their work decline as their dependence on employers and clients has grown. Today, professionals increasingly work as the employees of large, often bureaucratic organizations

such as business corporations, hospital systems, or enormous professional service firms. organizational control has eroded the autonomy and circumscribed the jobs of many practitioners, who, as employees, are unable to resist that control by turning to other clients. This phenomenon is perhaps most evident in the health care professions. The organization of medical and other health care work has undergone a broad transformation from professional dominance to managerial control (Freidson, 1984; Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000), a path that has ironically been paved in part by consumer movements challenging professional control. Increasingly, corporate employers and third-party payors dictate what services physicians provide and how they provide them (Boyd, 1998; Hoff, 2003; Kellogg, 2011).

Professionals are also affected by the insecurity and precarity that now broadly characterize the employment landscape. In the case of professionals, information technology has exacerbated this trend by greatly facilitating the spatial redistribution of expert work. For example, technology has allowed law firms, accounting firms, and medical practices to outsource important functions to lower-paid professional and quasi-professional workers located both domestically and abroad. It has led to the consolidation of news media into a small number of national and global outlets, thereby reducing the opportunities available for journalists. The rise of on-line distance learning, which has gained purchase in a growing swath of academic institutions, may have a similar impact on academic faculty as many of the functions they perform are increasingly embedded in digital code. Some observers even foresee a "platform university," in which mobile devices displace classroom learning.

Income and social status. The relative income and social status of the professions have declined as the result of several processes. First, the inequality of the overall income distribution has increased. When compared to the levels of wealth to be made in finance or information technology, even well-paid doctors and lawyers now look decidedly middle-class. Moreover, inequality within professions has grown, largely by extending the lower tail of the income and status distributions as increasing numbers of professionals work in part-time, contingent, or outsourced positions. Nowhere is this more evident than in higher education, where tenured and tenure-track professors account for a shrinking minority of university faculty and an increasing share of teaching is done by non-tenure-track faculty whose jobs are lower paid and less secure. Finally, the movement of formerly excluded groups – such as women, minorities, and individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds – into professional occupations means that professions can no longer rely on an association with high-status demographic groups (Whites, men, and individuals from upper-class backgrounds) to bolster their prestige and authority. At the same time, the inability of many professions to achieve greater diversity and inclusion has exposed them to far-reaching public critiques.

Public service orientation. In some professions, specialization, globalization and information technology have brought practitioners into closer interaction with colleagues in different cities and countries than with peers in their own localities. These occupations – such as law, accounting, software design, and

management consulting – are often also the ones where clients or employers are large corporations. Faced with weakened professional communities and powerful market demands, practitioners increasingly find themselves torn between a professional logic and a market logic (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) and see themselves as part of "professional service industries" that cater to needs as defined by clients. Pulled toward the pursuit of profit and market share, they struggle to maintain allegiance to the alternative values that their profession traditionally sought to uphold (Barnhizer, 2004; Moore, Tetlock, Tanlu, & Bazerman, 2006).

These changes to the social organization of professions have left them less able to assert the authoritativeness of their expert knowledge and defend it against challenge. The destabilization of professional authority carries significant implications for the survival of social institutions, such as democratic government and higher education, that depend upon a consensus concerning objective truth in order to function, as well as for society's ability to protect against collective risks such as climate change. A compelling warrant now exists for research on the changing institutional frameworks that govern professional work, the impact such changes have on the experiences and actions of professional workers, and the transformation which expertise itself exhibits.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

The chapters in this volume contribute to this developing area of research using a variety of settings and methods. Two chapters focus on how changing circumstances affect professional autonomy. Jane Van Heuvelen's chapter examines the impact of changes in organization and technology in a hospital neo-natal intensive care unit (NICU). She shows how the unit's shift to private rooms, combined with its implementation of a new information technology system, established a sharper division of labour, both among professional groups (nurses, nurse practitioners, and physicians) and among individual professionals within groups. This sharper division of labor required more formal coordination and reduced informal collaboration, thereby reinforcing status and authority differences and decreasing individual autonomy. The study reminds us that space matters – and that as the skills professionals wield evolve, so too must our conceptions of them.

As the chapter by Sabina Pultz and Ofer Sharone reveals, issues of autonomy arise not only in the performance of work itself, but also in the search for work. Faced with uncertain employment prospects, many professionals are forced to market themselves to employers in creative ways and engage in "emotional labor" to win them over. Pultz and Sharone also show that this phenomenon transcends national boundaries. In both Denmark and the United States, professional jobseekers receive similar advice, engage in similar networking activities, and perform similar work to manage their own emotions.

Four chapters address aspects of inequality in professional income and status. The chapter by Elizabeth Klainot-Hess investigates how non-tenure-track faculty feels about their jobs, and finds that satisfaction varies markedly with individuals'

orientations toward teaching and access to an alternative source of income. The author develops a useful typology with which to sort out faculty responses, which are far less homogeneous than scholars have allowed.

Koji Chavez's chapter examines racial-ethnic differences in the hiring process for software engineers in a Silicon Valley firm. He finds that African-American and Latinx job candidates are disadvantaged with respect to *both* White *and* Asian candidates – but the mechanisms of advantage for Whites and Asians differ. His chapter makes a useful contribution to the literature on the mechanisms that account for advantage and disadvantage in a rapidly changing ethnic landscape.

Elizabeth Gorman and Fiona Kay study the influence of law firms' professional development practices – *not* those targeted at increasing diversity, but those aimed at benefiting all junior employees – on subsequent racial and ethnic diversity at the higher (partner) level. They find that certain practices benefit African-American and Latinx lawyers while certain practices impair their progress, yet no practices have an impact on Asian-American representation. The chapter sensitizes us to the organizational conditions that seem likely to promote more inclusive arrangements in the professional firms – and also remind us of how much work remains to be done on this score.

Sida Liu's chapter addresses Abbott's (1981) well-known argument that professional "purity" – the extent to which a professional's work focuses on the profession's abstract knowledge base and is insulated from the messy reality of the world – is the key determinant of intra-professional status. Liu argues that our understanding will be better served by identifying specific types of *impurity* and tracing their potentially conflicting consequences for intra-professional status. His analysis reveals that impurities – the need to engage lay concerns and needs with little direct connection to core professional knowledge – can have variable effects, at times actually benefitting professional careers. His chapter provides further reason to acknowledge and study the changing structure of professional occupations, which no longer exhibit the characteristics they assumed during the "golden age."

Finally in this section, the chapter by Elisa Martínez, Laurel Smith-Doerr, and Timothy Sacco examines the professional struggle to maintain an independent point of view in the face of pressures toward "client capture" in the context of a relatively new profession – grant-funded evaluators. They explore the ways in which program administrators exert influence over evaluators to bend their judgments to favor the evaluated programs, as well as the dynamics whereby evaluators navigate and resist that influence. Evaluators occupy what seems to be a contradictory position: Mandated by funding agencies to oversee government supported work, their warrant still exposes them to controls enjoyed by their clients. Studying these workers' efforts to negotiate the strains and contradictions they confront, the authors provide a glimpse of work situations that are probably likely to grow in prevalence with the proliferation of knowledge work.

In addition to these thematic chapters, the volume also boasts two chapters on topics rooted in the sociology of work more generally, although they are not unrelated to professional work. One chapter, by Jussarados Santos Raxlen and Rachel Sherman, explores the complicated world of elite stay-at-home mothers,

who have sought to reconfigure the meaning and public identity their situation conjures. Rather than viewing themselves as "ladies who lunch," these affluent spouses have in effect "occupationalized" their positions as highly affluent home-makers. Overseeing various contractors, caregiving and household staff, and monitoring the activities of their children, they suggest, is increasingly like complex project management work. Redefining their situation and the social valuation they are due, the authors capture an important aspect of elite privilege and the reconfiguration of home-based activities as a form of skilled work.

The final chapter in the volume is Crowley, Payne and Kennedy's study of the tie between labor market insecurity and workers' responses to the job demands they confront. Using data from the Workplace Ethnography study, the authors pose a question that has received inconsistent answers in the past: How various forms of managerial practices and strategies for labor control seem to reshape workers' orientations toward their jobs. Developing a three-fold schema of managerial practices that identifies job constraints, managerial investments in training, and layoffs, the authors develop a theoretically rich account of the pattern that results. The chapter provides a model of careful and systematic mixed methods research on an important question confronting all of us in the new economy.

NOTES

1. Ironically, these attacks on knowledge are occurring at a moment when services based on knowledge and information have come to represent a large and ever-growing segment of the world economy.

2. One extreme version of this claim can be found in Goode (1966), who claimed that librarians were not true "professionals" because they help library patrons find the books they want to read rather than telling them what they *should* read.

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