



Professions and organizations: A European perspective



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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the literature from two complementary traditions on understanding professions in organizations – namely, the sociological analysis of professions and the more managerialist organizational theory. Notwithstanding their strong North American roots, these strands are brought together to provide a blended European perspective on professions in organizations based on the now dominant and interrelated neo-Weberian and neo-institutionalist theories. Initially centering on North American roots, it is noted that the European literature deriving from this blended theoretical base has been mushrooming in recent years. The range of issues addressed by this research is highlighted with reference to a number of specific professional groups in Europe. We then focus on a cohesive case study on the professions and organizations in healthcare, to which so much attention has been given by researchers in this field.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary research area of professions and organizations can be considered both as a branch of the sociology of professions (Saks, 2016 *forthcoming*) and of the organizational theory that studies the managerial aspects of professional work (Brock, Leblebici, & Muzio, 2014). In the literature these two aspects have all too rarely been brought together, but this article attempts to do so in a blended manner in over-viewing key aspects of professions working in organizations. It focuses particularly on the European context from which some of the most exciting work is now emerging. This paper outlines the growth of the European contribution in these two traditions from what were originally heavily North American roots. It then goes on to discuss the notion of professions and their organizational setting and how they may most helpfully be analyzed, building on these traditions. Finally, the paper considers European research published in English-speaking sources on specific professions in their organizational context – illustrating this in more depth through a case study of work on the health professions, before drawing the paper to a conclusion.

From the standpoint of sociological theories of professions, the

field of professions and organizations was heavily based on work from the United States, with a range of contributors spanning from Talcott Parsons at Harvard University to Eliot Freidson at New York University. This work was paralleled by an increasing range of literature on professions and their organizational context from Britain, the early span of which was overviewed by Millerson (1964). This initial research was taken forward in new directions in Britain by such contributors as Terry Johnson at the University of Leicester and Michael Burrage at the London School of Economics. At this stage, there was little work on professions and organization in the sociological tradition emerging from continental Europe, but this was to expand greatly especially around the start of the twenty-first century. At this time, as Adams (2015) points out, there was a burgeoning amount of published research on this subject in journals, books and book chapters – with a particular Western European and Canadian interest in state–profession relations and professional regulation. As Adams has also helpfully shown in her review of the sociological literature, the focus in the United States has shifted to a large degree from regulatory issues to the organizational challenges faced by professional groups – no doubt because of the increasingly strong corporatist environment that has prevailed there.

In the case of the parallel strand of more managerially oriented organizational theory, the literature has centered on an interest in such areas as professional service firms, public sector professional

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service organizations, multinational and transnational private corporations, together with the organizational implications for the expert knowledge workers that we term professionals. Here the field also has strong North American origins, with most of the early concepts, theories and empirical findings published by scholars based in Canada and the United States. For example, here important advances developed around writers like Richard Scott at Stanford University, Henry Mintzberg at McGill University, and Royston Greenwood and Bob Hinings at Alberta University. The initial dominance of the field by North America is indicated in the seminal review chapter by Powell, Brock, and Hinings (1999), where scarcely a reference is cited from European based scholars. However, fast-forwarding to the more recent overview of this area by Empson, Muzio, Broschak, and Hinings (2015), about one third of the references are by scholars currently based in Europe – even though much of the foundational material harks back to North American work from the latter half of the twentieth century.

Further evidence of this more recent trend in both the sociological and organizational literature towards a more Euro-centered focus on professions and organization is that some two-thirds of the twenty competitively peer-reviewed articles published by the new *Journal of Professions and Organization* in 2014 and 2015 have first authors based in Europe. And while these trends may or may not be significant, it is claimed in this paper that the contribution of European scholars to the field of professional organization is not only substantial, but also distinctive (Chia, 2014). Here Adams (2015) has indicated that the European concentration on regulation and policy represents the most marked difference from the United States literature on professions and organization – although Canadian scholars, as well as those in Australia, have also prioritized this area. However, in all these countries there are many overlapping fields of study of professions – ranging from considerations of gender and ethnicity to discussions on organizational autonomy and inter-professional working. Nonetheless, there seems to be somewhat less commonality with Eastern European societies like Russia where the study of professions is only slowly establishing itself following their disestablishment after the Bolshevik Revolution and their current gradual, and by no means inevitable, re-emergence under President Putin (Saks, 2015b).

2. Theories of professions and organizations

But what exactly is a profession in this regard? Classically there have been great disputes over this term with the early Anglo-American sociological literature based on defining such groups in terms of such unique characteristics as expertise and altruism that differentiated them from other occupations and enabled them to play a positive role in the wider society (see, for example, Greenwood, 1957; Goode, 1960). This interpretation, however, was seriously questioned following the more skeptical counter cultural years in the mid-1960s/1970s because, amongst other things, of the lack of agreement on the key aspects of professions; unthinkingly taking professional ideologies on trust; and failing to understand professions in the context of a conflictual social structure based on social class divisions – where professions themselves typically follow their own self-interests in increasing their income, status and power (Saks, 2012). As a result of such critiques of the more sugar-coated taxonomic interpretations of professions and the vulnerability of a number of the theoretical alternatives to these to the charge of being too abstract and self-fulfilling, the neo-Weberian approach to professions has emerged as the mainstream theoretical orthodoxy in analyzing professional groups in organizational and other contexts.

The neo-Weberian perspective on professions is based on the concept of exclusionary social closure drawn from the work of the

late nineteenth/early twentieth century social theorist Max Weber. Professions in this respect are seen as being primarily centered on the establishment of state underwritten occupational monopolies in the market in neo-liberal economies, linked to the realization of professional projects based on favourable socio-political conditions and astute occupational strategies. In this process, professions are held to be able to regulate market conditions in their own favour by restricting opportunities to a limited group of eligibles – characteristically leading to an increase in their income, status and power (Parkin, 1979). This is well illustrated by the cases of medicine and law in Britain and the United States which are seen as key exemplars of occupational groups that have won monopolies in the market supported by the state (Berlant, 1975; Burrage, 2006). Although they vary in form from *de facto* to *de jure* monopolies and were established through the federal government and state-by-state licensure respectively, they share core similarities. They can also be seen as at the head of a hierarchy of professions in terms of power and dominance in the market, not just within national boundaries but also across international jurisdictions – including in Britain in relation to the European Union, with its mutual recognition of qualifications (Olgiati, 2003).

This theoretical perspective on profession has many advantages when considering professionals in organizational structures in the Anglo-American context – not least being the definitional clarification it provides, based on the legally circumscribed boundaries of professions. However, neo-Weberian analyses of profession have themselves at times come under attack for being applied with insufficient empirical rigour; being overly critical of professional groups; and failing to place professions and professionalization in the context of the wider occupational division of labour (Saks, 2010). Nonetheless, these criticisms do not so much relate to a design fault, as the occasionally inappropriate operationalization of the neo-Weberian perspective. More pertinent here is the claim by Sciuilli (2005) that, whilst the concept of exclusionary social closure may fit Britain and the United States, it has little wider relevance in Europe. It is of course true that this neo-Weberian model of professions has not historically been as prevalent in continental Europe (Collins, 1990), in part because professionals are often embedded in government bureaucracies (Evetts, 2000). However, there is a continuum of arrangements, and many European societies have forms of exclusionary closure in relation to at least some occupational groups – including in countries such as Germany (see, for instance, Kuhlmann & Saks, 2008; Rogowski, 1995). Together with a more holistic theoretical approach recognizing the importance of understanding failed and ongoing as well as successful attempts at professionalization, this brings any European analysis clearly within a neo-Weberian purview.

Nonetheless, as Adams (2015) observes, one of the most frequent current themes of the international sociological literature on professions relates to challenges facing professions. In Europe, this reflects changes in the socio-political environment in which professions work, with the stronger emergence of neo-liberalism – variously linked to the rise of the New Public Management, entrepreneurialism, marketization and integrated work organizations (Svensson & Evetts, 2010). These trends have led to discussions about deprofessionalization and the declining autonomy of professions – especially in the context of the United States where there have been the most powerful trends towards corporatization (Saks, 2015b). Such developments have also been theorized through the employment by Evetts (2013) of the concept of organizational professionalism, as opposed to occupational professionalism based on the concept of social closure. This notion is intended to reflect the growing bureaucratization, centralization and rationalization of the work environments of professions – centered more on the Weberian notion of legal-rational authority.

However, the importance of such societal changes should not be overstated in Europe as research suggests that their impact on professional independence has frequently been effectively buffered by factors like professional values, interests and strategy (see, for example, [Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008](#); [Jonnergård & Erlingsdóttir, 2012](#)).

It is not surprising, though, that a particularly significant and distinctive European literature on hybridization has developed – whereby the classic tensions identified by American contributors like [Freidson \(2001\)](#) between professions and their employing organizations are seen as being more or less successfully managed by the intermediary professionals concerned ([Noordegraaf, 2015](#)). Here, as [Waring \(2014\)](#) notes, the growth of professional-managerial hybrids and the blurring of boundaries between professions and organizations can be viewed as creating collective professional interests in more bureaucratic and marketized workplaces. This sense of professional capture neatly leads on to the neo-institutionalist approach which complements neo-Weberianism and has proved increasingly popular in examining the relationship between professions and their increasingly large-scale public and commercial organizational locations in Europe and beyond ([Adams, 2015](#)). In this respect, the essence of neo-institutional theories of professions, which emerged more from a managerial business school environment, is that professions are one institution amongst others struggling for survival in an ecological domain ([Suddaby & Muzio, 2015](#)) – even if, as has been seen, they have often managed well enough in preserving their own group interests in income, status and power.

Interestingly, the perspective of the neo-institutionalists also has earlier links to taxonomy insofar as some of its proponents have sought to delineate the core characteristics of professional service firms operating in areas such as accountancy and law in terms of features like knowledge intensity or low capital requirements ([Nordenflycht, 2010](#)). However, just as with taxonomic approaches to professional groups themselves, there has been disagreement about the central features of a professional service firm ([Brock, 2006](#)). There has also been a great emphasis in the current European literature in analyzing these bodies from a neo-Weberian perspective – in terms of their elite position in the wider socio-political order ([Reed, 2012](#)). In this analysis, [Seabrooke \(2014\)](#) has spotlighted that there are often transnational, as well as national, dimensions from a linked ecologies perspective. In drawing on the pivotal work in the United States of [Abbott \(2005\)](#) there are potential theoretical pitfalls in examining the interplay between professions, professional service firms, multinational corporations and the state from an ecological perspective. However, these may be to a large degree bypassed if it is recognized that the term ecology is simply a metaphor and not a literal Darwinian template for understanding interactions on the wider political stage ([Perreault, Bridge, & McCarthy, 2015](#)).

3. The study of specific professions and their organizational contexts

So what conclusions have studies drawing on the neo-Weberian approach and neo-institutionalism reached about the professions and organization field in Europe? This article selectively illustrates some of the research projects within these perspectives with reference to specific professions in European settings. In terms of the nature of the professional groups considered, though, it should be noted that, while in global terms the variety of professions has increased substantially – not least as a result of technological change and de-regulation ([Powell et al., 1999](#)) – the range actually studied by researchers does not seem to have kept pace. Many European studies, for instance, have been on medicine and the

health professions – which will be considered as a case study in the next section. There has also been a strong parallel focus on mainstream areas like accountancy and law which have increasingly become the terrain of the professional service firm. [Muzio, Brock, and Suddaby \(2013\)](#) describe how this restrictive tendency persists in research into professional organizations in general – despite the fact that, as [Malhotra and Morris \(2009\)](#) and [Nordenflycht \(2010\)](#) observe, there is growing heterogeneity among professional services in terms of the nature of knowledge used, jurisdictional control, and the nature of client relations. As they point out, moreover, these issues affect such aspects of organizational structure as internal processes, range of specialization, geographic spread of offices, fee structure, and the degree of centralization. Yet researchers generally have been reluctant to explore fields of research beyond high profile traditional professions.

However, a wider variety of professions and professionalizing groups are now beginning to be studied by European research programmes. An important relatively early contribution came from [Alvesson \(1995\)](#) whose work on a Swedish information technology consulting firm highlighted the distinctive flat structure and informal culture in this area. Insight from another Scandinavian researcher into different kinds of engineering firm was provided by [Lowendahl \(2005\)](#), who outlined their customized services, expert employees and strong sense of professional ethics. Such studies have provided the basis for an impressive further body of research into engineering firms, many with Norwegian bases in the offshore oil and gas and shipping industries, as exemplified by [Breunig, Kvålshaugen, and Hydle \(2014\)](#) and [Kvålshaugen, Hydle, and Brehmer \(2015\)](#). Although not all aspects of engineering itself are marked by exclusionary social closure in a European context ([Evetts, 1998](#)), this work underlines the developing breadth of the analysis of professions in organizations in Europe. Unlike in the United States where the widening range of professional groups was acknowledged and identified at an early stage ([Bell, 1976](#); [Freidson, 1986](#)), but not pervasively researched, less mainstream professional groups are now starting to be examined in some detail from a neo-Weberian viewpoint in the European literature on professions and organizations.

In this vein, research into human resource management in professional service firms has distinct European roots and has thrived in Britain and elsewhere. [Swart and Kinnie \(2003\)](#), for instance, examined the ways in which the policies and processes of human resources can contribute to the sharing of knowledge of vital importance to the organization, while [Swart, Kinnie, Rossenberg, and Yalabik \(2014\)](#) have analyzed the impact of employee commitment on knowledge sharing in a professional service firm. The contribution by Dutch researchers [Doorewaard and Meihuizen \(2000\)](#), moreover, succeeded in relating vibrant debates about the resourcing of the firm to the professional service context. In so doing, they picked up on the strategic types of [Lowendahl \(2005\)](#) which link control of the resource base by the organization, team or individual with a strategic focus on client relations, problem solving or adaptations to produce nine strategic modes. They then simplified these into two generic strategic orientations for professional service firms – namely, an expertise and efficiency orientation – and showed how certain human resources practices support these strategies. [Carvalho and Cabral-Cardoso \(2008\)](#) from Portugal meanwhile outlined the way human resources were able to achieve both functional and numerical flexibility in a combined and interdependent manner in management consulting firms. The study by [Stringfellow and Thompson \(2014\)](#) of the dynamics of status among Scottish accountants reveals how volatile the core sociological construct of status can be in these contexts.

This human resources professional theme in fact joins up with the neo-Weberian study of a number of other professions in European organizational settings, as well as the wider international context. This is highlighted by [Swart and Kinnie \(2010\)](#) who studied the relationship between human resources and the development of knowledge assets and organizational learning in sixteen professional service firms in the Anglo-American context, including law firms, management consultancies, software houses and advertising agencies. Studies of such areas have frequently been linked to the neo-institutionalist approach, as exemplified by research by [Adamson, Manson, and Zakaria \(2015\)](#) on the new professional group of executive remuneration consultants in the United Kingdom. This work helpfully enhanced academic understanding of their professionalizing project by placing it within a macro institutional framework. Reciprocally, from a neo-institutionalist perspective, Danish research by [Harrington \(2015\)](#) has considered the position of wealth management professionals across Europe and elsewhere. Following interviews, she has demonstrated how local practices and ideas could develop into transnational institutions – thereby reasserting the theoretical importance of interactions between professionals, their clients, peers and organizational contexts on the specific field of international finance. This underlines the ongoing power of even newly evolving professions on a global stage.

In enhancing our understanding of more established professions in a wider organizational and changing socio-political context, debates over empowerment and disempowerment in a neo-Weberian framework have again been central in the contemporary European literature, whether for lawyers in Britain in face of increased marketization ([Sommerlad, Young, Vaughan, & Harris, 2015](#)) or university lecturers in Finland in response to declining state support ([Aarrevaara, 2015](#)). Hybridization has also emerged as a major neo-Weberian theme – not least in relation to longer standing professions such as accountancy which is crucially involved in both making visible and calculable the hybrids with which it deals, as well as hybridizing itself through dealings with a range of disciplines inside and outside organizational frameworks ([Miller, Kurunmaki, & O'Leary, 2008](#)). Aspects of the regulated domain of accountancy – such as actuaries ([Collins, Dewing, & Russell, 2009](#)) – have also been studied in this process. In this respect, [Bévort and Suddaby \(2016\)](#) have examined how accountants interpret competing logics of professionalism as they move from practice into managerial roles and as their organizations shift from professional partnerships to more corporate organizational structures. In analyzing the way in which individual professionals make sense of their new roles and integrate the competing demands of professional and managerial logics, they argue that they construct their own identity scripts based less on inter-subjective interactions than individual cognition and interpretive subjectivity.

This clearly poses some challenges to the professional solidarity that has for long been identified by neo-Weberians as so significant in gaining and maintaining exclusionary social closure (see, for instance, [Johnson, 1972](#)). To be sure, such independence from wider organizational constraint has not been possible for some occupational groups in a European context – not least in Soviet Russia where professional groups were for long seen as class enemies in the socialist state ([Moskovskaya et al., 2013](#)). From a historical viewpoint, though, [Macdonald \(1995\)](#) has indicated how important solidarity was for architects in winning exclusionary closure in parts of Western Europe, coupled with outlining acceptable political objectives for professionalization for state officials. As the European literature has also emphasized, so has been the European Union professional education policy itself in sustaining architecture as an established profession in the market in an age of supranational regulation ([Le Bianic & Svensson, 2008](#)). Crucially too,

contemporary studies of professions in Europe have normally placed a heavy emphasis on the study of minority groups in considering professions in their organizational context. This is exemplified by the study by [Bolton and Muzio \(2008\)](#) of professional projects in law, teaching and management in Britain, where growing opportunities for women were offset by continuing evidence of gendered exclusion, segmentation and stratification.

4. Case study: the health professions

This leads on, finally, to the consideration of the distinctive features of the neo-Weberian and neo-institutionalist European literature on the health professions as a relatively cohesive case study. The main reason for choosing this case is that – as in North America – the medical profession is one of the most widely referenced areas of published work on the professions in Europe. Usually it is discussed in the context of the health professions, the literature for which is also sampled here to give an overview of some of the key issues in this particular field. The reason for the revered position of medicine in published work is that it is seen as a leading profession both in Europe and more globally ([Colyer, 2012](#)). This is also reflected in its parallel dominance within the health field where [Turner \(1995\)](#) has classically categorized allied health professions like nurses as subordinated professions and groups such as dentists and physiotherapists as limited professions operating in legally defined territories related to parts of the body or therapeutic method, with complementary and alternative medicine practitioners as excluded practitioners. Although there has arguably been some fudging of the boundaries since his categorization was written, it neatly sets out the position of medicine not only as a 'top dog' profession, but as at the apex of the health professional pecking order.

In this regard, there has been much work focused on Europe on the development of the medical profession from a neo-Weberian perspective from the early contribution of [Parry and Parry \(1976\)](#) through to more recent work by [Saks \(2015b\)](#) that includes coverage of Britain and Russia based on its interplay with the state and the market. This research has been geographically extended by [Allsop and Jones \(2008\)](#) and [Bureau and Vrangbæk \(2008\)](#) who chart international variations in medical governance placing the legal regulation of the profession in a wider organizational context in societies ranging from France and the Netherlands to Denmark, Germany, Italy and Norway. This has been paralleled by general work on the regulatory development of other health professional groups in Europe ([Johnson, Larkin, & Saks, 1995](#); [Allsop & Saks, 2002](#); [Carvahlo & Santiago, 2015](#)), along with particular studies of such professions – as illustrated in Britain by nurses and midwives ([Borsay & Hunter, 2012](#)) and complementary and alternative medical practitioners, some of whom have now gained exclusionary closure through a process of professionalization ([Saks, 2015a](#)). One of the key themes in this and other literature, as for professions more generally, has been the broader impact of the New Public Management to which the analysis now turns.

The New Public Management, introduced in neo-liberal societies to enhance the efficiency of public services ([Dent, Chandler, & Barry, 2004](#)), has posed a particular and increasing challenge to the wide range of health professions which are mainly based in the public sector in Europe ([Bureau, Blank, & Pavolini, 2015](#)). This has again led European writers to introduce the theme of hybridization – not least in the context of the medical profession which has fought hard to retain its power and privileges in face of increasing managerial controls and the regulatory desires of the state ([Saks, 2014](#)). These interactions do not of course necessarily lead to complementarity and the ready formation of hybrids because contradictions may emerge ([Fischer & Ferlie, 2013](#)), but

they do underline the dilemmas of hybridization for doctors (Spyridonidis, Hendy, & Barlow, 2015). In this sense, as Kurunmaki (2004) highlighted in her study of medical expertise in Finland, the knowledge of professions may itself be hybridized. She argued that this occurred with the willing adoption of management accounting techniques by medical practitioners in the wake of the New Public Management reforms, in a manner that was resisted in the United Kingdom.

Professional resistance to managerial agendas in organizational settings has also been reported in relation to other health professions by Carvalho (2014) in relation to nursing in public hospitals in Portugal. Here it was found that nurses developed hybrid professionalism by incorporating and reshaping conventional professional norms and values and the dominant discourses of the organizations in which they were employed. This research is supported by a Dutch study of neighbourhood nurses by Postma, Oldenhof, and Putters (2015) who argued that these professionals increasingly engaged in organizational issues and absorbed them into their activities through articulation work in order to simultaneously provide and organize care through the integration of public services. Such studies, however, have not lessened long standing claims from some quarters that medicine and other health professions are being deprofessionalized (Elston, 1991). However, in Britain at least the state shelter of the National Health Service seems to have served to protect the medical profession in a manner that has not occurred in face of greater corporatization in the United States (Saks, 2015b). In fact, the profession may have become more restratified than deprofessionalized from a neo-Weberian perspective following the rise in the standing of general practitioners relative to hospital consultants, with the growing emphasis on primary care (Calnan & Gabe, 2009) – despite shifts towards more state-inspired external professional regulation to increase public protection (Chamberlain, 2012).

This brings into focus the neo-institutional approach, by emphasizing the complexity in which organizations are located in contemporary European neo-liberal societies. In their Swedish study of the micro management of a national report on quality in healthcare, Blomgren and Waks (2015) observed four conflicting institutional logics. These were a democratic logic, a managerial logic, a market logic and a professional logic. This underlines the institutional complexity with which hybrid professionals in organizations have to contend in the health field in order to define problems and to provide solutions aligning with multiple prevailing logics. This complexity is amplified further by the work of Seabrooke and Tsingou (2015) who applied a linked ecologies approach to the way in which professional teams of medical experts, demographers and economists forged issue distinctions in Europe and beyond in relation to low fertility. Such professional transnational interactions are reminiscent of the extensive neo-Weberian research that has also taken place on factors that inhibit and promote inter-professional and inter-organizational collaboration between health and social care professionals for the benefit of the user in more localized European contexts (see, for instance, Pollard, Thomas, & Miers, 2009). Moreover, as with fertility issues, Witz (1992) and Kuhlmann and Annandale (2012) demonstrate that gender has been a crucial vector of interest in studying both single and inter-professional developments in organizations involved in European healthcare.

5. Conclusion

This paper has overviewed an extensive literature both from European contributors and on a number of key interlinked aspects of professions and organizations in a European context. In so doing, it has distinctively drawn on both neo-Weberian and neo-

institutionalist theories – thereby covering a range of blended work, from the sociology of professions to the more managerialist organizations perspective. These theories have been illustrated with reference to the escalating amount of European research undertaken on professional groups based in the private enterprise and public sector. European researchers have also contributed a refreshing focus on newly developing professions, while deepening insights into the more established professions – centrally including those in healthcare. Two enduring thoughts emerge. The first is that this field encompasses a number of complex intersecting levels, but with rich reward for those committed to enhancing academic knowledge in this area and applying research to real managerial situations in Europe. The second is that the reader cannot fail to be struck by the dynamic nature of the domain of professions and organizations in an ever changing world, with the fast moving European context increasingly at its epicenter. In this light, we trust that the ever growing literature base and route map of the terrain to which attention has been drawn in this jointly crafted review article in the Reflections on Europe series will also prove useful to the reader.

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