SOCIOLOGY OF THE PROFESSIONS: A DEAD-END STREET?

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DEFINING A PROFESSION

The problem of defining a profession continues to be a central issue. In the structural-functional view, the term "profession" refers to a "comparative status level attained after deliberate action by an occupation" (Millerson 1964a: 9). This professionalizing action refers to a dynamic process whereby an occupation "can be observed to change certain crucial characteristics in the direction of a profession" (Vollmer & Mills 1966: 7). A profession is an occupation with a set of professionalizing attributes acquired in the process of development.

The attribute model of the professions contains two types of elements. The attitudinal or behavioral attributes reflect the individual dimension of the work experience, while the structural attributes refer to the occupational level of analysis. The profession concept has been defined mainly in terms of the structural attributes of occupations. However, the core characteristics of a profession are uncertain. Millerson (1964a) identified 19 unique definitions of "profession" which include 14 different structural attributes. No two contributors are agreed that the same combination of attributes adequately describes a "real" profession. Together with six other unique definitions which have been introduced since Millerson's survey, these profession concepts are shown in Table 1.

Parsons (1968) maintained that although there may be some ambiguity at the fringes, there is very little doubt about the defining characteristics of a profession. Goode (1966: 903) concluded that "if one extracts from the most commonly cited definitions all the items which characterize a profession . . . a commendable un-
TABLE 1: SHARED ATTRIBUTES OF 26 DEFINITIONS OF "PROFESSION"

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light. Defining the term "profession" may just be a way to legitimize dominance of the contemporary work setting by a few old, established occupations. The plethora of profession concepts may be a byproduct of the author's tendency to have a specific occupation in mind when defining the term. Therefore, we need to demythologize the professions, in a critical analysis which does not confuse the claims of salient work groups with their real nature, and we must avoid the misplaced emphasis on occupational ideology. This study evaluates the structural-functional model of the professions in terms of its success in generating a scholarly consensus on the definition of "profession". This "success" may take two forms. First is unanimous agreement by all scholars on a single definition, or some support for each of a small number of definitions within the pool of scholars. An empirically sound analytical model should unite rather than divide, and focus rather than diffuse the efforts and opinions of scholars working in that theoretical frame. If the attribute model succeeds, it should produce considerable agreement among social scientists on the true profession.
Second, a historical similarity among definitions may be present, and the similarity of concepts may be a function of historical time in which they were introduced. The presence of systematic historical variation would indicate that the attribute model can produce trends. Such trends would tend to unite scholarly opinion.

METHOD

An author by attribute table (16 x 24) was constructed from Millerson's literature review (1964a), and my own. The matrix (Table 1) was entered on computer cards by author profile, scoring 1 for an included attribute, and 0 otherwise. The data set was run in an algebraic computer routine which multiplied the matrix by its transpose. In the output matrix, the diagonal cell entries represented the number of attributes used by each profession concept, and the off-diagonal cell entries represented the number of attributes shared by each pair of concepts.

The similarity between profession concepts was defined as the ratio of the number of shared profession attributes to the maximum possible number of attributes shared with the shorter of the two attribute lists (Rosengren 1968). The similarity measure thus has a range of possible values from 0 to 1. Given the profession concepts of Wilensky (1964) and Pavalko (1971), for example, with 4 common attributes in attribute lists of 7 and 5, respectively, the ratio of 4/5 = .80.

\[ S = C / \min (r_j, r_j) \]

where \( S \) is similarity, and \( C \) is the number of shared attributes for profession concepts of authors \( i \) and \( j \) (Horan 1977). The symbol \( r \) is the number of attributes in an author's list. (The matrix of similarity measures for all possible pairs of profession concepts is available from the author.)

To explore the interrelation of
the profession concepts, a technique was used to analyze the underlying structure of a similarity matrix. This is Guttman-Lingoes smallest space analysis (SSA-I). SSA-I "enables one to determine the smallest Euclidean space in which one may adequately portray graphically the interrelationships of a set of points whose proximity is a function of the degree to which two points are found together, relative to other points" (Laumann 1969 188). Each author or profession concept is represented by a point in a Euclidean space of m dimensions. When the correlation between authors i and j is higher than that between authors k and l then the distance will be smaller between i and j than between k and l. The closer the authors appear in the space diagram (Figure 1) the greater the similarity between their respective definitions. Thus the space diagram is a graphic portrayal of the similarity matrix. The definitions were also represented by the year in which they were introduced, in order to explore the historical similarity among concepts.

The coefficient of alienation is a measure of the goodness of fit of the correlation matrix to the m-dimensional configuration of points. The space diagram (Figure 1) achieved a coefficient of .188 in a 2-dimensional solution, which represents an acceptable fit between the picture and the structure of the data (Laumann 1969). The cutting curves which partition the space diagram into regions of agreement were drawn by hand. The result, as Bailey puts it, is: "If two objects occupy the same cell of a typology, they must be identical (with a small amount of leeway for pragmatic purposes) on all features defining the typology. The objects are placed in two different cells of the typology if they possess disparate values on even one variable." (1972 88)

In operationalizing similarity, raw counts of common attributes cannot be used. This would result in considerable bias against definitions with short attribute lists. The advantage of this instrument is that in profession concepts with attribute lists of widely differing lengths, a small actual count of common attributes may be associated with maximum similarity where there is subsumption of one attribute list by another, a situation of maximum possible similarity between definitions. However, using this measure, definitions with many attributes will tend to be in the center of the space, as they have the most opportunity to agree with definitions which use few attributes. Those with few attributes would be biased toward the periphery of the space diagram.

FINDINGS

Table 1 reveals little substantive agreement in defining "profession" in the social sciences. The broadest areas of agreement are a function of two attributes. These areas of agreement are shown in Figure 1. The left region of the space diagram includes nine definitions which attribute tests of competence to the true profession. Except for Tawney (1922) and Bowen 1955, 7 of the 9 authors also attribute education and training requirements to a profession. Twelve authors describe the true profession as dedicated to the public good (Table 1). Ten of these 12 authors appear in the right region of the space diagram. Howitt (1951) and Moore (1970) attribute both public altruism and tests of skill to a profession, and they appear in the left region of the space diagram. Excepting Marshall (1939) and Crew (1942), 8 of the 10 authors also attribute a theoretical knowledge base to professions.

The middle zone, which separates these areas of agreement, consists of 7 definitions which attribute neither competency testing nor altruistic public service to the true profession. These attri-
tributes and their correlates, education and training requirements, and a theoretical knowledge base, constitute the basis of broadest agreement with 15 of the 26 authors. While there is other attribute agreement, no more extensive areas of agreement can be found.

Historical analysis shows that the similarity among profession concepts is not a function of time of publication. Definitions tend to emerge independently, and not in a time trend.

The 1-dimensional solution fit the data matrix very poorly, with a coefficient of alienation of .336. The 3-dimensional solution did not provide an appreciably sharper picture of the data structure than the 2-dimensional analysis. (Coefficient of alienation = .116)

CONCLUSION

While the extent of similarity among definitions is neither marked, nor is the historical background of this problem area orderly and systematic, it would be premature to abandon the attribute model. Given the accuracy of the present findings, only a single property of analytical models has been addressed; namely, the capacity to organize scholarly definitions to produce agreement.

Despite the relevance of 14 occupational attributes, the scholars appear divided regarding which two attributes to agree on as characteristic of the true profession. This is a rather narrow basis of agreement. Nearly half of all authors with an opinion (11 of 26) ignore this problem. In light of the failure of the attribute model to establish a substantial scholarly consensus during its 65-year history, alternative approaches to this problem should be emphasized.

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