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 cen-
tral issue. In the structural-func-
tional view, the term "profession"
refers to a "comparative status
level attained after deliberate act-
ion 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 occu-
pation with a set of professionaliz-
ing attributes acquired in the pro-
cess of development.
. The attribute model of the prof-
essions contains two types of ele-
ments. The attitudinal or behavior-
al attributes reflect the indivi-
dual dimension of the work experi-
ence, while the structural attri-
butes refer to the occupational
level of analysis. The profession
concept has been defined mainly
in terms of the structural attri-
butes of occupations. However, the
core characteristics of a profes-
sion are uncertain. Millerson
(1964a) identified 19 unique defini-
tions of "profession" which in-
clude 14 different structural attri-
butes. 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 Miller-
son's survey, these profession con-
cepts are shown in Table 1.
. Parsons (1968) maintained that
although there may be some ambi-
guity at the fringes, there is
very little doubt about the defin-
ing characteristics of a profes-
sion. Goode (1966 903) concluded
that "if one extracts from the
most commonly cited definitions
all the items which characterize a
profession .. a commendable un-

animity is disclosed .." But Mill-
erson (1964b 15) asserts that "of
the dozens of writers on this sub-
ject, few seem able to agree on
the real determinants of profes-
sional status." Neither consensus
nor dissensus has been empirical-
ly demonstrated. Authors should
carefully specify their meaning of
the critical word when they use
it, but social scientists are not
scrupulous about this, and it is
often impossible to be certain of
the type of work group to which
the author refers when speaking
of professions.
. Clearly, some occupations are
more powerful than others. The
traditional and conservative struc-
tural-functional model of the pro-
fessional has recently been chal-
lenged by a more critical ap-
proach (Goode 1969; Johnson 1972;
Freidson 1973; Roth 1974). By this
view, the presence of a few domin-
ant, established occupations has
misled social scientists into using
traits or attributes to explain the
ascendency of some jobs over
others. In an area dominated by
uncritical, common sense defini-
tions, such an argument is plaus-
ible. Given that a true profession
exists, the rest is easy. Everyone
knows that medicine, law, and
engineering are professions. The
true profession is conceived in
terms of these model occupations.
When these occupations are ap-
praised, social science awards
them professional status. They
must be professions because they
fit the profession model. Thus,
medicine is a profession because
it fits our definition of the true
profession, as everyone knows,
medicine is a true profession,
because medicine is a profession.
. The hazards of such circular
reasoning are compounded by the
fact that knowledge of these domi-
nant occupations is largely based
on the pictures which they give
of themselves. Roth (1974) convin-
cingly argues that these self-por-
traits amount to little more than
propaganda designed to present
the occupation in an ingratiating

TABLE 1:   SHARED ATTRIBUTES OF 26 DEFINITIONS OF "PROFESSION"

Attributes	Flexner 1915	S, B Webb 1917	Christie 1922	Tawney 1922	Carr-Saunders & Wilson 1933	Ross 1938	Marshall 1939	Crew 1942	Leigh 1950	Howitt 1951	Simon 1951	Lewis & Maude 1952	Wickenden 1952	Drinker 1953	Parsons 1954	Bowen 1955	Cogan 1955	Greenwood 1957	Gross 1958	Milne 1959	Barber 1963	Wilensky 1964	Goode 1969	Moore 1970	Pavalko 1971	Elliot 1972
Skill based on theoretical knowledge	*			*	*		*					*	*		*	*	*	*	*			*			*	*
Required education and training	*	*	*						*	*	*	*	*					*				*	*	*	*	
Competence tested				*	*				*	*	*	*				*							*		*	
Organized	*		*	*		*	*	*				*	*		*	*		*		*		*			*	*
Adheres to code of conduct			*	*	*	*		*				*	*	*			*		*	*	*	*	*		*	*
Altruistic service	*					*	*	*	*				*			*				*	*		*	*	*	
Applied to affairs of others	*	*	*														*			*	*	*		*	*	
Indispensable public service									*																	
Licensed community sanction															*			*				*				
Clear professional-client relation										*			*													
Fiduciary client relation												*		*												
Best impartial service given			*				*																			
Loyalty to colleagues															*					*			*			
Fees, fixed charges			*		*																	*				

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 pro-

fessions 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.

FIGURE 1: SPACE DIAGRAM OF AGREEMENT ON THE PROFFESSION CONCEPT
Coefficient of alienation, 2-dimensional space = .188
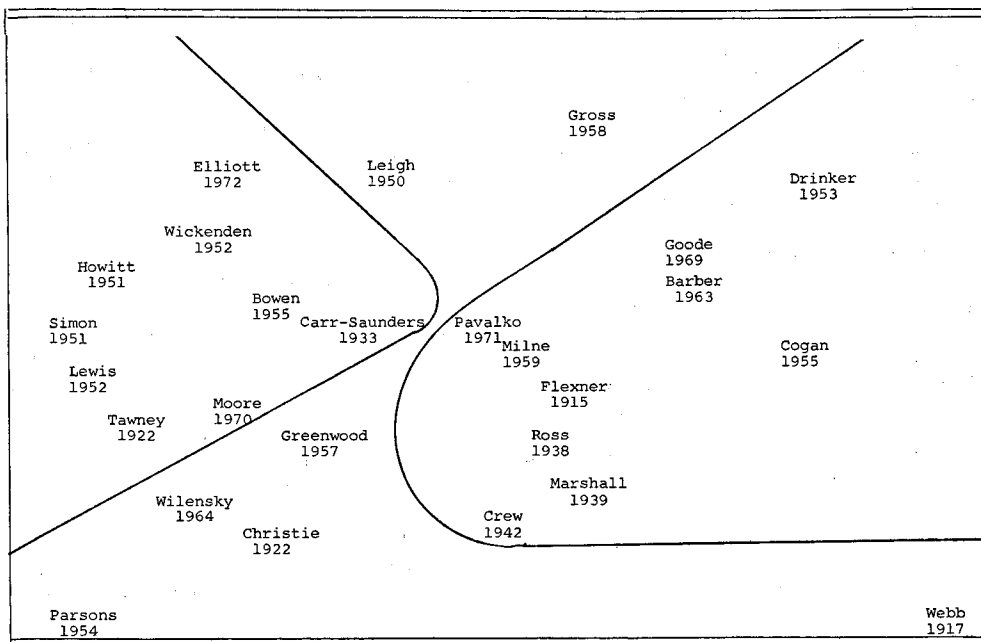
. Second, a historical similarity among definitions may be present, and the similarity of concepts may be a function of historical time in which they were introduced. The presence of systematic historical variation would indicate that the attribute model can produce trends. Such trends would tend to 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.

$$S = C / min (r_i, r_j)$$

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 n 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-

butes and their correlates, educa-
tion and training requirements,
and a theoretical knowledge base,
constitute the basis of broadest
agreement with 15 of the 26 au-
thors. While there is other attri-
bute 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. (Coef-
ficient of alienation = .116)
CONCLUSION
. While the extent of similarity
among definitions is neither mark-
ed, nor is the historical back-
ground of this problem area order-
ly and systematic, it would be
premature to abandon the attri-
bute model. Given the accuracy of
the present findings, only a sin-
gle property of analytical models
has been addressed; namely, the
capacity to organize scholarly
definitions to produce agreement.
. Despite the relevance of 14 occu-
pational attributes, the scholars
appear divided regarding which
two attributes to agree on as
characteristic of the true profes-
sion. 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 attri-
bute model to establish a substan-
tial scholarly consensus during
its 65-year history, alternative
approaches to this problem should
be emphasized.

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