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Work and Occupations 2011 38: 275

DOI: 10.1177/0730888411417565

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Work and Occupations

38(3) 275–302

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DOI: 10.1177/0730888411417565

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Abstract

Both professional work and the sociological study of professional work experienced a “golden age” in the mid-20th century. When dramatic changes began to shake the professions in the 1970s and 1980s, however, old approaches no longer fit, and the research area became quiescent. Yet interest in professional work simply “went underground,” surfacing under other names in a variety of sociological and interdisciplinary fields. In the process, researchers’ focus expanded to include a broader range of “expert” or “knowledge-based” occupations as well as traditional professions. This essay brings these disparate research streams together and shows that they cohere around four central themes: expert knowledge, autonomy, a normative orientation grounded in community, and high status, income, and other rewards.

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Keywords

professional work, expert knowledge, autonomy, community, status

While it is commonly acknowledged that the great majority of American workers are now employed in producing services (Lopez, 2010; McCammon & Griffin, 2000), it is less widely recognized that professional services constitute a substantial and growing segment of the service sector. In 2010, professional and related services constituted the single largest major occupational group in the United States, with more than 30 million jobs; this occupational group is also projected to grow the fastest and gain the largest total number of jobs—more than 5 million—between 2008 and 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). As professional occupations have grown to encompass a larger proportion of the labor force, the organizational and market conditions of professional work have changed rapidly. Contemporary professional workers navigate uncharted waters as they forge new ways of relating to their work, to their colleagues, to their clients, and to the organizations that increasingly dominate their working lives. New developments in knowledge and technology have led to the emergence of new expert occupations. These should be exciting topics for social-scientific study.

Yet the sociology of professions has been largely quiescent. Following a flowering in the middle of the 20th century, sociological work with a specific focus on the professions has slowed considerably. We suspect that the reason for this is that the study of the professions is associated in many researchers' minds with a limited number of traditional occupations and with outdated theoretical frameworks that no longer hold much appeal.

However, as we show in this essay, the study of professional work has not disappeared. Like a river encountering a blockage in its main bed, it has simply run into other channels. Active research streams relating to professional work—and the broader field of expert or knowledge-based work—have emerged in the sociological subfields of work and workplace inequality, organizations, medicine, and law, as well as in interdisciplinary literatures in organizational studies, sociolegal studies, and health policy. Although these literatures address different (but overlapping) audiences, they demonstrate strong thematic affinities and pose similar questions. One of the goals of this essay is to make this implicit intellectual kinship more visible and thus to help create a more coherent context for the exchange of ideas.

A second goal is to show that, as the study of professional and expert work has run into new channels, the field of inquiry has broadened. Interest is no longer confined to the traditional professions, nor are researchers particularly concerned with policing the boundaries of the concept of “profession” and

excluding occupations that do not qualify. As economic inequality grows in developed nations, the important line of demarcation increasingly lies between jobs and occupations that require expert knowledge—in the form of specialized higher education—and those that do not. Labor markets, organizational structures and policies, and working conditions tend to be relatively similar on each side of this divide, and quite different across it. In the eyes of contemporary scholars, the commonalities between traditional professions and new forms of knowledge-based work are more important than the differences. Attributes that once defined the *scope* of the topic area are now seen as *variables* within it, to be explained by the characteristics and actions of individuals, organizations, and occupational groups.

In this article, we begin by tracing the history of the study of professional work in sociology through its “golden age” and subsequent collapse in the face of societal change. We then turn to the contemporary research landscape and identify the key themes that unify the study of professional and knowledge-based work across sociological and interdisciplinary fields.¹

The Classical Sociology of the Professions

The “Golden Age”

The traditional professions—occupations such as medicine, law, accounting, architecture, the clergy, science and academics, engineering, and a handful of others—enjoyed what was widely recognized as a “golden age” in the middle of the 20th century (Freidson, 2001, p. 182; Galanter & Palay, 1991, pp. 20-36). Although many of the actual circumstances of work varied substantially across professions, all benefited from the high level of legitimacy accorded to expert knowledge obtained from university-based formal education. In most cases, professions’ knowledge was also certified by the state as qualifying—sometimes even *solely* qualifying—its possessors to provide services within certain defined areas of need. In many professions, notably medicine and law, practitioners largely worked in solo or relatively small group private practice, which afforded them considerable control over the content and economic circumstances of their work. The local nature of most professional practice supported the growth and persistence of strong local professional communities, which used informal methods of socialization and social control to uphold and (at least to some extent) enforce norms of professional ethics. Finally, in an era before the recent staggering increases in corporate compensation, professionals’ levels of income and social status ranked higher than those of almost all other occupations.

The sociological study of the professions also arguably experienced a “golden age” during this period. The topic attracted an active research community that included some of the discipline’s most prominent scholars (e.g., Merton, 1958, 1968; Parsons, 1939, 1951). The functionalist theoretical orientation that prevailed at the time gave a prominent place to professions as one of the institutions that sustain social order. Most scholarship of this era sought to impose a conceptual framework on the varied phenomena of professional life, usually at a fairly high level of abstraction, and did not attempt to move beyond conceptualization to causal explanation. Scholars devoted a great deal of effort to defining the concepts of *profession* and *professionalism*—and assessing whether or not specific occupations met their definitions—without achieving a clear consensus (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Cogan, 1953; Flexner, 1915; Goode, 1969). In the 1960s, scholars began to see all occupations as moving along a continuum of *professionalization* with varying degrees of success (Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Goode, 1961, 1969; Wilensky, 1964), but the difficulty of defining the ideal type of successful professionalization remained (Becker, 1962).

Four central attributes of professionalism emerge from this body of scholarship: (a) expert knowledge, (b) technical autonomy, (c) a normative orientation toward the service of others, and (d) high status, income, and other rewards. *Expert knowledge* is the sine qua non of professional work. All professions draw on a body of knowledge composed of formal, abstract principles (Abbott, 1988; Goode, 1961) grounded either in science or in moral thought (Rueschemeyer, 1972). Professional services involve applying these abstract propositions to solve concrete problems. When conceptual categories are vague or the principles of cause and effect are indeterminate, professional reasoning requires inference and judgment based on tacit, experiential knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 1970, pp. 163-166). There may be an optimal level of indeterminacy: knowledge that is insufficiently effective at solving problems cannot sustain a profession’s legitimacy, but knowledge that is too easily codified can be appropriated and applied by others (Jamous & Peloille, 1970; Wilensky, 1964).

A second important attribute of professionalism, highlighted by Freidson (1970, 1984), is *technical autonomy*, which flows from control over knowledge. If members of a given profession have control over a body of knowledge—that is, if society recognizes their expertise and accords them the right to determine what is correct or true in this area—then no one outside the profession can legitimately dictate what those professionals do or how they do it. Other occupations may draw on the same body of knowledge, but without controlling it they must remain subordinate, achieving at best a semiprofessional

status. Autonomy exists on two levels: individual practitioners control their own work, and professional groups regulate their members without outside interference (Freidson, 1970, pp. 369-370).

Other writers, notably William Goode (1957, 1961, 1969), argued that a *normative orientation to the service of others* is a hallmark of professionalism. The concept of “service orientation” had two aspects: a professional puts the client’s interests above his or her own, rather than exploiting his or her expert knowledge at the client’s expense; and a professional serves the public good. When the interests of client and public do not coincide, these two aspects must be disentangled (Goode, 1961), but most scholars left this potential conflict unaddressed. A service orientation also implied the existence of a community that establishes and enforces ethical norms through processes of socialization and social control (Goode, 1957, 1961; Merton, 1958; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). However, empirical research showed that while local professional communities shaped individual careers (O. Hall, 1948), their normative self-regulation was often weak (Freidson, 1970, pp. 91-108; Freidson & Rhea, 1963).

Finally, scholars agreed that professions have relatively *high social status, income, and other rewards*. The move from description and conceptualization to causal explanation emerged first in this area. Taking a functionalist approach, Davis and Moore (1945) contended that professions are highly rewarded because they perform functions that are necessary for societal survival, while their skills require arduous training that individuals must be induced to undertake. In a different functionalist vein, Goode (1957) argued that society offers high rewards to professions as an incentive to regulate themselves, a necessary task that nonprofessionals are ill equipped to perform. In the 1970s, conflict-theory perspectives began to contend that professions achieved status and dominance through their own efforts (Freidson, 1970, 1984) and deliberately sought wealth and power at the expense of other groups (Berlant, 1975). Notably, Larson (1977) claimed that successful professions pursued “professional projects,” actively seeking collective upward mobility through social closure, economic monopoly, and respectability, and Abbott (1988) focused attention on professions’ competition with each other to dominate “jurisdictions” or markets for services addressing particular needs.

Empirical Change and Intellectual Impasse

By the 1970s and 1980s, while many sociologists were still trying to articulate a clear vision of “golden age” professionalism, the important changes that have since transformed the professional world were already under way.

Professional work has become increasingly dominated by large organizations as employers, as clients, and (especially in medicine) in other roles involving the imposition of external controls on individual professionals (Leicht & Fennell, 1997). Markets for professional services and professional labor have become increasingly transnational (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008; Harvey, 2011). Professions have also faced demographic transformation: as higher education expanded to accommodate the Baby Boom and legal changes mandated equal access to higher education for a variety of historically excluded groups, the membership of most professions began to reflect growing numbers of young people, racial minorities, and women (Epstein, 1993). At the same time, professions that sell their services in open markets have faced threats to their ability to limit competition among their members. Historically, many professional occupations restricted their members' business-seeking activities through ethics code provisions banning advertising, client solicitation, and competitive bidding, but in the 1970s, federal courts and regulatory agencies began to strike down these bans (Calvani, Langenfeld, & Shuford, 1988; Freidson, 1983). Yet another source of change came from the emergence of new occupations offering services based on expert knowledge but lacking the autonomy, service orientation, or prestige of traditional professions (e.g., biochemists, management consultants, financial analysts, public relations specialists); these occupations' different logics challenged traditional understandings of the professional role.

Although sociologists were relatively slow to focus on many of these changes, they did notice the movement of professionals from solo practices and small partnerships into larger work organizations. As early as the 1960s, Scott (1966) and R. Hall (1967, 1968) argued that bureaucracy and professionalism constitute alternative and conflicting modes of organizing work. Researchers began to investigate the impact of bureaucratic work structures on individual professionals, finding that bureaucracy did not necessarily constrain professional autonomy (Engel, 1969, 1970), but did produce a sense of role conflict (Corwin, 1961; Scott, 1965).

Interest in the changing characteristics of professions, especially medicine, grew during the 1970s and 1980s, but many scholars found it difficult to move beyond the intellectual frameworks of the "golden age." Accordingly, their response to the transformation they observed was to ask whether well-established professions such as medicine and law still qualified as "professions." According to the "deprofessionalization" thesis, the traditional professions were losing control over both their bodies of knowledge and their day-to-day work (Haug, 1977, 1988; Ritzer & Walczak, 1988; Rothman, 1984). A more Marxian "proletarianization" view held that professionals were headed

toward a full-blown loss of autonomy at the hands of capitalists, similar to that of factory workers (Derber, 1983; McKinlay, 1982). Although neither of these views commanded a consensus among scholars of the professions (Freidson, 1984; Light & Levine, 1988; Navarro, 1988; Wolinsky, 1988), they signaled that the “golden age” of the professions—and of the sociology of the professions—had ended. By the 1990s, many sociologists concluded that existing theoretical frameworks had become implausible and no longer generated interesting questions. Although a trickle of work continued, scholarship with an explicit focus on the professions fell out of fashion and the research area became inactive.

Contemporary Research on Professional and Knowledge-Based Work

While the “sociology of the professions” has become quiescent, research on professional and expert work has continued by “going underground.” Framed in a variety of ways, questions relating to professional work have emerged in several subfields of sociology and in interdisciplinary literatures. For example, researchers interested in workplace inequality have investigated processes leading to differential hiring, promotion, and income in professional work contexts. Organizational scholars have examined the structures and employment practices of professional firms and their consequences for workers. Sociologists of medicine have inquired into physicians’ responses to changes in the social organization of health care. None of these various research conversations reflect an explicit interest in general questions about professional or expert work as a broad category. Yet these contemporary research streams are united by common threads that also link them to the past. The four themes that were important to the sociology of the professions in the “golden age”—expert knowledge, autonomy, a normative service orientation supported by community, and status, income, and rewards—remain central in current work. As we show below, in a review that is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, much of contemporary literature can be organized around them.

Expert Knowledge

Professional and expert work involves the creation, communication, and application of expert knowledge. Most knowledge workers—other than those engaged solely in research and teaching—make use of expert knowledge to

solve concrete problems. Beyond Abbott's (1988) delineation of the three phases of diagnosis, inference, and treatment, however, we know relatively little about how professionals and experts use knowledge in their work. In pursuing this question, contemporary work has drawn a distinction between abstract, formal knowledge and tacit, experiential knowledge. For example, some researchers have examined how lawyers think about abstract legal rules and apply them to resolve factual cases (Mertz, 2007; Stratman, 2004) and how technicians translate abstract scientific or engineering concepts into material objects and actions and vice versa (Barley, 1996; Bechky, 2003b). Other scholars have investigated how lawyers and physicians utilize tacit knowledge in diagnosing problems and selecting courses of action (Blasi, 1995; Cimino, 1999).

Substantial attention has been paid to the question of rationalization and codification of knowledge and its implications for the nature of professional work. In the context of the medical profession, interest in this topic has been spurred by the movement toward "evidence-based medicine" and the adoption of empirically supported clinical practice guidelines and protocols. Timmermans and his colleagues (Timmermans, 2005; Timmermans & Angell, 2001; Timmermans & Berg, 1997) have shown that clinical guidelines and protocols, and the research evidence supporting them, are often either ignored or transformed in various ways in local contexts. Nevertheless, because such guidelines specify how health care should be performed, they have the potential to narrow physicians' discretion and undermine their authority (Timmermans & Kolker, 2004), and have generated resistance on the part of some doctors (Boyd, 1998; Broom, Adams, & Tovey, 2009).

Rationalization and codification also have implications for expert occupations' ability to maintain control over "their" bodies of knowledge. The combination of codification, the elimination of restrictions on advertising, and the revolution in information technology has made knowledge more widely accessible, both to clients and to competing occupational groups. For example, medical web sites and television advertising of prescription drugs broadly distribute medical information—some of it of dubious quality—to members of the public (Briggs, Burford, De Angeli, & Lynch, 2002). This can create awareness among the public of both medical conditions and the drugs designed to treat them, translating into patients' demands that their doctors diagnose and prescribe (Lyles, 2002). Technological developments also allow the more routine aspects of traditional professional work to be performed by individuals with less extensive or different training, or even directly by electronic technology. Thus, the codification of legal knowledge together with computer database technology have made it possible for web sites to provide even relatively sophisticated legal services directly to the public (Kritzer, 1999).

Another stream of research, conducted primarily by organizational studies scholars, has examined how expert occupational groups within workplaces function as epistemic communities that create, reproduce, and share work-related knowledge. The existence of such communities becomes apparent when complex projects—such as the design and construction of a large public building or the care of patients with abdominal cancers—require the cooperation of participants from different disciplines. Research interest has focused on the obstacles posed by differences in knowledge and meaning at the boundaries between epistemic communities. To facilitate collaboration in the workplace, groups use various strategies to share meaning across boundaries (Bechky, 2003b; Carlile, 2004; Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006). Of course, groups also use knowledge differences to make status claims and assert jurisdiction over particular issues (Bechky, 2003a; Oborn & Dawson, 2010; Zetka, 2001).

Most contemporary professionals and expert workers perform their work within complex organizations. Reflecting organizational sociology's long-standing view of organizations as both "rational" and "natural" systems (Scott, 2003), a promising line of research examines the interplay between expert knowledge and both formal and informal organizational structure. Informal structuring occurs when relatively stable work practices and authority relations evolve to reflect the actual distribution of relevant knowledge across occupational groups (Barley, 1986) and group strategies for sharing knowledge (Kellogg et al., 2006). Conversely, organizations may respond to the embeddedness of knowledge within occupational communities by altering their formal structures. Some organizations may make changes that enhance occupational groups' ability to utilize their knowledge effectively, such as eliminating layers of management (Barley, 1996) or establishing protocols that facilitate knowledge sharing (Carlile, 2004). Taking a more Taylorist approach, other organizations may seek to appropriate experts' knowledge and centralize it in a "knowledge management" system (Waring & Currie, 2009).

Finally, a small but intriguing stream of work investigates the role of formal and informal occupational groups that span multiple workplaces in influencing the nature and scope of expert occupations' knowledge. Traditional professions and other well-established expert occupations are usually represented by formally organized professional associations. Such associations contribute to the diffusion of innovation across workplaces, both directly, by disseminating information to members through seminars, mailings, and web sites, and indirectly, by facilitating networks of "weak ties" that promote the exchange of new knowledge (Swan & Newell, 1995). Professional associations may also lead efforts to redefine or enlarge the boundaries of their

occupation's body of knowledge, as the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) sought to do in the 1990s (Covaleski, Dirsmith, & Rittenberg, 2003; Fogarty, Radcliffe, & Campbell, 2006). Practitioners of newer expert occupations, or those who take on new roles within older occupations (e.g., physician-manager), may lack such formal associations. In such cases, workers' felt need for mechanisms for sharing and updating knowledge may lead to the emergence of informal "communities of practice" (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Autonomy

During the "golden age" of professionalism, most professionals were self-employed entrepreneurs; today, most knowledge workers are employed by relatively large, complex organizations such as professional service firms, group practices, corporations, government agencies, or hospitals. In the distinctive case of medicine, government agencies and insurance companies also make their presence felt through third-party payment arrangements. Contemporary researchers remain interested in the ways in which organizations structure the work of professionals, the extent to which organizational structures constrain workers' autonomy, and workers' behavioral and attitudinal responses. This body of work echoes the longstanding focus in the sociology of work on the nature of employer efforts to exert control over workers and the extent to which workers accept or resist that control.

Organizational efforts to control expert work have been most intense in medicine, where the combination of skyrocketing costs and the necessity of providing services to nonaffluent populations have created strong pressures for efficiency (Hafferty & Light, 1995; Leicht & Fennell, 1997). Some physicians are salaried employees of organizations such as hospitals or "staff-model" health maintenance organizations (HMOs); others remain self-employed in solo or group practice, but must agree to the conditions imposed by third-party payers to receive payment for their services (Hoff & McCaffrey, 1996; Hoff, Whitcomb, & Nelson, 2002). Both employing and third-party organizations have implemented practices that constrain the way physicians provide medical care, such as lists or "formularies" of approved drugs, required preauthorizations for specific tests or procedures, and utilization reviews of services that have already been administered (Boyd, 1998; Hoff, 1999; Hoff & McCaffrey, 1996). Many physicians perceive that these practices limit their autonomy (Hoff, 1999; Marjoribanks & Lewis, 2002; Prechel & Gupman, 1995).

In other forms of professional and expert work, especially those that serve corporate and business clients willing to pay high fees, pressures to reduce costs and increase efficiency have been weaker. So far, at least, organizations have largely responded to cost pressures by replacing more expensive workers—such as law firm partners or tenured professors—with less costly ones—such as permanent salaried attorneys or non-tenure-track faculty (Gorman, 1999; Park, Sine, & Tolbert, 2011), rather than by seeking to control the nature of their day-to-day work (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008). An interesting exception is the case of franchise law firms offering standardized services to a relatively low-income clientele, which have adopted a highly routinized approach to organizing work (Van Hoy, 1995). Greater organizational restrictions on expert autonomy may be in the offing in other settings where services are provided to individuals of limited means, notably universities.

An interesting aspect of the organizational control of knowledge workers—in contrast to frontline factory or interactive service workers—is that control is often imposed by members of the same occupation. In medicine, for example, both the academic elite defining best practices and the administrative elite enforcing them are usually physicians themselves (Hafferty & Light, 1995). As a result, the distinction between autonomy at the level of the individual and autonomy at the level of the occupational group, which remained largely academic for Freidson (1970), has taken on a new reality. While autonomy at the occupational level may remain considerable (Chiarello, 2011), autonomy for individual practitioners may be much less so (Hafferty & Light, 1995).

Consistent with longstanding concerns in the sociology of work, researchers have asked whether professionals and other knowledge workers react to restricted autonomy with compliance or resistance. There is evidence of both responses. In medicine, some self-employed physicians accept the increased involvement of external stakeholders, while others employ resistance strategies, such as “creative” billing, to do what they want (Hoff & McCaffrey, 1996); some physician-administrators eagerly take on a managerial role, while others passively resist by asking no questions and spending little time on administrative tasks (Hoff, 1999); and some hospital residents support mandated work-hour limits while others do their best to circumvent them (Kellogg, 2009). Among lawyers employed by corporations, some embrace their employer–client’s profit-making goals and look for ways to utilize the law to further them, while others resist pressures to abandon the role of internal “cop” (Nelson & Nielsen, 2000). A fruitful task for future research will be to identify the individual and contextual characteristics that produce these different responses.

Reflecting another well-established theme from the sociology of work, contemporary scholarship on professional and expert work has explored the link between autonomy and individuals' work attitudes. Consistent with research in other settings, studies show that knowledge workers are more satisfied with their jobs when they enjoy greater autonomy at work (Dunstone & Reames, 2001; Hoff & McCaffrey, 1996; Warren, Weitz, & Kulis, 1998). Greater autonomy also seems to enhance workers' commitments to their employing organizations, but the association between autonomy and professional commitment is less clear (Hoff, 2000; Suddaby, Gendron, & Lam, 2009; Wallace, 1995).

Normative Orientation and Community

In the classical literature, professions were seen as communities of common fate. Their members shared experiences of training and socialization, conditions of work and pathways of career progression, expectations of lifelong affiliation with the chosen profession, and standing in broader society. These common experiences supported and informed a shared identity as well as a set of shared norms about how to conduct professional work. In recent years, however, specialization by groups of workers, a growing diversity of organizational forms and employment statuses, the globalization of markets for expert services, and the sociodemographic integration of historically homogeneous occupations have all conspired to undermine bases of shared experience and identity that might support community within an occupation. At the same time, new potential sources of community emerge in the organizations in which professionals work and in multidisciplinary work groups.

One of the more interesting challenges to occupational community and the traditional service orientation comes from the consumers of professional services. Knowledge-based work that relies on arcane expertise is a "credence good" to clients. Producers of credence goods identify and treat problems that their clients do not know how to solve and may not even recognize that they confront (Dulleck & Kerschbamer, 2006). Historically, this imbalance in understanding between professionals and their clients was both a justification for the special ethical responsibilities of professionals and a source of power in their relations with their clients. It also supported an image that all members of a given profession were equally competent and capable. Many large, complex organizations today employ in-house knowledge workers to manage their purchase of external knowledge-work services, making these organizations potentially more discerning purchasers of services and employers of the contract workers who now often provide them (Barley & Kunda,

2004; Ò Riain, 2010; Rosen, 1989). Knowledge workers who serve individual members of the public confront clients who increasingly perceive themselves as well-informed about choices between providers, often because of information they receive through advertising or the Internet. While one's reputation among fellow experts was once paramount, today such workers must also contend with assaults to their reputation with a lay public audience. Various free and fee-based rating services provide individuals who are current or potential clients of expert workers access to ratings and reviews that permit them to compare providers on past clients' satisfaction and on services' price, thus permitting even lay clients to make invidious distinctions among potential providers (Hornsby, 2011; Sandefur, *in press*). Pressures by clients have invoked professional reaction, as professional school researchers in some of these occupations have responded by encouraging professionals to educate themselves about the new sources of information available to clients (Ahmad, Hudak, Bercovitz, Hollenberg, & Levinson, 2006; Murray et al. 2003; Wald, Dube, & Anthony, 2007).

Ostensibly shared ethics are undermined when different ways of organizing work create distinct challenges and opportunities for self-dealing that are shaped by client power and savvy and by market conditions. Professional school scholars writing about their own occupations continue to document classical struggles between professional self-interest and collective ethical responsibilities (e.g., Brody, 2010). Changes in the very nature of occupational "community" create new ethical challenges for practicing members of knowledge-based occupations. Although empirical studies that rigorously document change over time in ethical beliefs or behavior are relatively rare (but see, for example, Boutcher, 2009), a sizable literature explores the possibilities of ethical decline within studied groups of knowledge workers (Barnhizer, 2004; Gendron, Suddaby, & Lam, 2006; Gordon, 1988, 1998; Regan, 2004; Suchman, 1998; Wyatt, 2004). As conditions of work and employment change, the material bases of ethical cohesion and the relationships among professionals that permitted informal surveillance and discipline dissolve. New employment statuses and work relationships create new normative logics (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) and new sources of ethical conflict (Abel, 2008; Draper, 2003; Chambliss, 2006; Suddaby et al., 2009). Consistent with the focus on variation and explanation that we have suggested characterizes the new "underground" scholarship, contemporary studies attempt to identify and understand differences in ethical behavior and beliefs among members of the same occupation (Arnold & Kay, 1995; Shapiro, 2002).

Developments that may undermine community at the occupational and organizational levels are complemented by developments at the individual

level, as revealed in scholarship investigating the extent and causes of individual adherence to occupational identities and ideologies. Contemporary scholars discover notable variations within groups of workers, attributing these variously to factors such as diversity in the social backgrounds of workers in the same occupation, increasingly differentiated and stratified training, differences in the organizational cultures where professionals work, and employment in a proliferation of new work statuses (Granfield, 2007; Nelson & Trubek, 1992; Schleef, 2006). New forms of work organization, such as multidisciplinary and project-focused work teams, create contexts in which pressures for collaboration can weaken individual adherence to occupational identities (Barley, 1996; Lloyd, Schneider, Scales, Bailey, & Jones, in press).

Traditional professional affiliation was lifelong, and the study of professional attrition and turnover was of interest because of its link to professional identity and commitment (Evans & Laumann, 1983). A number of developments suggest new patterns of occupational affiliation for a wide range of knowledge workers: the so-called boundaryless career; the development of a "professional services sector"; the incorporation of professional workers into organizations that provide nonprofessional career tracks into management; and the entry into professions and similar occupations of groups of workers who step in and out of professional careers, particularly women (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Kay, 1997; McKenna, 2006; Preston, 2004; Sandefur, 2007). In part in response to these changes, scholars have begun to extend classic questions from the sociology of work about the predictors of job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment into the study of professional work (Hagan & Kay, 2007; Hull, 1999; Wallace, 1995). This new research resonates strongly with questions about occupational integration and inequality that dominate the contemporary study of status and rewards for professions and other knowledge occupations.

Status, Income, and Rewards

Among the material conditions that supported a sense of shared fate and lifelong affiliation for professional workers was these occupations' enjoyment of high social status and rewards. Contemporary research resonates with this theme, both illustrating its persistence—in relative terms—for professional occupations and demonstrating many ways in which inequality among professional workers is common and pervasive. A group of inequality scholars led by Grusky has begun to argue that all occupations are communities of a sort: groups of actors with shared interests that form the basic units of the class structure (Grusky & Sorensen, 1998). To date, this work has

focused largely on exploring the occupational structure as a cause of inequality, demonstrating that professional occupations continue to claim relatively high pay, in part through mechanisms such as licensing requirements and educational certification that contribute to these occupations' abilities to secure social closure (Kim & Sakamoto, 2008; Timmermans, 2008; Weeden, 2002). This group of scholars has yet to turn much attention to the degree to which a given occupation's workers are conscious of a shared identity or interests, or to how occupational groups create a sense of shared interests or engage in collective actions to further them in support of occupational status or other rewards.

One means through which occupations act collectively to support their social status is through the work of occupational associations. Some of the most fruitful contemporary studies of such associations come from scholars of formal organizations. Studies have explored how change in the institutional logics underlying professional fields leads to the founding of professional associations (Lounsbury, 2002) and shown how professional associations marshal institutional rhetoric to fend off challenges to their control of knowledge and the rewards that attend it (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Other work has explored how professional associations shape the institutional logics of organizational fields in ways that create new understandings of an occupation's role and jurisdiction (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). Consonant with scholars' new interest in variation within groups of ostensibly similar knowledge workers, a small body of research explores diversity and localism in occupational collective action (e.g., Domagalski, 2008).

A sizeable literature examines inequality at work among individual professionals and knowledge workers. One important stream of research focuses on the contours and determinants of race and gender inequalities among workers in the distribution of income, incumbence, and productivity in these relatively desirable jobs. Many of these studies explore the magnitude of group inequalities among workers in the same line of work and the mechanisms through which these are created. This research seeks evidence of how factors such as discrimination, access to social capital, professional training and performance, opportunities to take on different kinds of job responsibilities, or family status shape inequalities between workers who are members of different groups (e.g., Cohen, Huffman, & Knauer, 2009; Gorman, 2005; Gorman & Kmec, 2009; Hull & Nelson, 2000; McBrier, 2003; Reskin & McBrier, 2000; Whittington, 2011). Other studies examine how the entry of historically excluded groups changes the organization of work and careers or the structure of rewards such as income and tenure, as well how different

groups are allocated across these changed structures (e.g., Hagan & Kay, 1995; Kornrich, 2009; Ku, 2011; Merritt & Reskin, 1997; Morgan, 1998; Noonan, Corcoran, & Courant, 2005; Williams, 1992). Finally, a smaller stream in the literature investigates differences in rewards across work specialties and strategies, rather than across groups of workers (Leahey, 2007; Sandefur, 2001; Stovel, Savage, & Bearman, 1996).

Conclusion

Research on professional and expert work has not vanished. Although the classical sociology of the professions came to an intellectual standstill, the growing importance of professional and knowledge-based work in today's economy made it inevitable that scholars would turn their attention to it once again. They have indeed done so, but the resulting body of work is fragmented across several sociological and interdisciplinary fields. In this essay, we bring those diverse research streams together.

Four central themes—expert knowledge, autonomy, a normative service orientation supported by community, and high status, income and rewards—provide a strong element of continuity between the classical sociology of the professions and contemporary research. However, these themes reappear today in new forms. Rather than serving as scope conditions that bound the phenomenon of interest, they have become characteristics that vary both across knowledge-based occupations and across work contexts within occupations. This new focus on variation encourages inquiry into covariation with individual and contextual characteristics, which in turn leads researchers to think in terms of explanation. Unlike earlier work, most contemporary research moves beyond description and conceptualization to articulate causal propositions that explain outcomes at the individual, organizational, and occupational levels. With these new intellectual lenses, it becomes possible to ask, for example, which individual and organizational characteristics promote greater or lesser autonomy for physicians, without worrying about whether physicians are still sufficiently autonomous to qualify as “professional.”

Contemporary inquiries further differ from those of the “golden age” by abandoning overarching but underspecified theoretical frameworks. In functionalist theory, the prime mover is “society” as a whole, which somehow establishes the structures—such as professions—that it needs to maintain order and survive. In variants of conflict theory, which retain a functionalist form (Stinchcombe, 1987), the prime movers are groups defined by characteristics that are consequential for wealth, status, and power, including occupation. Strong implicit assumptions are made about the desire and capacity of

individual group members to act in concert to pursue their collective interests. In current research on professional and expert work, in contrast, explanations focus on *processes* and the social actors who move them forward—individual workers, employing organizations, and formal and informal occupational groups.

Finally, contemporary studies of professional and knowledge-based work have moved beyond the study of professions per se in favor of inquiry into the characteristics that originally made these occupations of sociological interest. In affirming this development, we join our voices to those of a small and diverse choir of scholars who argue for a reinvigorated sociology of knowledge-based occupations (Brint, 1996; Kritzer, 1999; Muzio, Ackroyd, & Chanlat, 2008; Reed, 1996). A broadened field of inquiry allows researchers to escape the tiresome debates about the definitions of “profession” and “professionalism” in which earlier generations of scholars remained mired.² More importantly, it better reflects economic and social realities. The world of work is increasingly divided into two hemispheres: one which requires expert knowledge accessible only through higher education, and one which does not. Within the knowledge-based hemisphere of work, many of the same questions apply to both traditional professions and occupations of questionable “professional” status. Rather than excluding the latter group of occupations from consideration, current research expands its focus to include them.³ To the extent that differences remain between traditional professions and other forms of knowledge-based work, this new perspective permits them to be treated as variables in need of explanation—thereby opening the door to many intriguing questions that were previously ruled out of bounds.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Our primary focus is on the research literature from North America. Although we note European and other international contributions that have been influential here, we do not attempt to do justice to the development of scholarship elsewhere.
2. Definitional debates still rage on in Europe. See, for example, Sciulli (2005) and Torstendahl's (2005) response.

3. One question that we leave unresolved is whether business management should be considered knowledge-based work. There are certainly plausible arguments for doing so. Managers provide a kind of expert service to the organizations that employ them. They often have training in a traditional profession, such as accounting, law, or engineering, and move with relative fluidity between traditionally professional work and managerial work. Business schools offer university-based academic training in management, although their similarity to traditional professional schools has been questioned (Khurana, 2007). Perhaps most importantly, the nature of work and the shape of careers are growing increasingly similar for business managers and traditional professionals (Leicht & Fennell, 2001).

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