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"The social contract": on university teacher professionalism, structure, and agency

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Abstract

Professionalism perceived more conventionally is an occupational set of virtues or "essence", while a critical conceptualisation of the notion is related to political dimension that makes it subject to social and power relations. Recent discussions on "professionalism" in literature while revealing the complexity of "professionalism" seem to highlight the political aspect of the concept and emphasise the determining role of external power discourses. Seeing "professionalism" as being socially constructed but with a more visible focus on the role of teachers, this paper explores the concept in the contemporary higher education context using the interaction between "agency" and "structure" as an analytical lens. In doing so, the paper argues for a potential of understanding "professionalism" as a "social contract": it is based on a more reciprocal relationship between university teacher agency and their social discourse.

Keywords: teacher professionalism; higher education; agency; structure; social contract.

Introduction to the topic

Professionalism, including teacher professionalism, is a shifting, contested notion (Gewirtz et al. 2009; Sachs 2013). Over the years the discussion on professionalism seems to evolve around two different interpretations: one that defines professionalism as an occupational value and one that focuses more on the critical, political aspect of the concept (Evetts 2009; Lester 2011). With states' educational reform and the mechanism known as "managerialism" spreading their impact on universities, the critical dimension of "professionalism" seems to be more emphasised. Professionalism is now interpreted as a discourse - the discourse of professionalism (Evetts 2009, 2013) - it is a political product of the controlling structure (e.g. Ozga 1995; Day and Sachs 2004; Ball 2003, 2012).

With different conceptualisations of the notion including "managerialism professionalism" (Sachs 2003; Whitty 2008) and "organisational professionalism" (Evetts 2009), professionalism is interpreted as being the cultural product of external social structure and this type of professionalism constrains in many ways professionals from exercising their own truly "occupational professionalism" (Evetts 2009). In the context of teaching, this imposing professionalism has been criticised to have changed teachers' skills, their work, and even their identity and soul (Ball 2003, 2012). Professionals are described as having become "regulated" (Barnett 2008, 192). Through the sociological lens of agency and structure, the current analysis of "professionalism" has positioned teachers and social structures as an oppositional pair, in which structure has a determining power over the shaping of "professionalism" while individual agency seems to have little room.

Resonating with the view that sees "professionalism" as being socially constructed, the paper however moves away from the understanding that sees the notion as (decisively) resulting from ideologies and power relationship: rather, it is based on a reconciliation between agency and structure. Expanding from this premise, the paper proposes "social contract" - an agreement between individual professionals and the society, as a conceptualisation approach to understanding "professionalism".

To achieve this, the paper will first provide an introduction to the conceptual base used, including agency, structure, and social contract. That "professionalism" is both an occupational value and a social coordination will then be discussed, and this proposition explains why "agency and structure" can be relevant in analysing the concept. From this premise, an analysis of "professionalism" through the lens of structure and agency is provided. Drawing upon the existing literature on the notion, the paper argues for the need to further explore the interaction between the

professionalism discourse (structure) and professionals (agent). The discourse of professionalism is not static but has a dynamic nature where "from within" and "from above" interlink, likewise professionals are not simply "victims" being governed and regulated, but they exercise agency in particular ways in responding to the discourse. Through this, features that make "professionalism" close to the nature of a "social contract" are unravelled. In doing so, the paper argues for a possibility for applying "social contract" in reading "professionalism" with an attention to the interconnection between university teachers and the discourse of professionalism.

The aim of argument

This paper explores the concept of "professionalism" in the contemporary higher education context using the interaction between "agency" and "structure" as an analytical lens. In doing so, the paper argues for a potential of understanding "professionalism" as a social contract: it is based on a more reciprocal relationship between university teacher agency and their social discourse.

Theoretical framework

The structure/agency interdependency and the social contract

"Agency" is a social science term which states that individuals - agents, with their intelligence, traits, and properties, have the capacity to act independently and make own free choices, while "structure" refers to the factors that determine or hinder an agent and his/her decisions (Barker 2005). The debate on whether agency or structure takes primacy has been long discussed, and may be irresolvable (Priestley, Edwards, and Priestley 2012). The paper however adopts a middle ground position that acknowledges human beings as knowledgeable actors but their action is not independent of the social structure. Agency is seen as constituent of structure, and human agents are "knowledgeable" enactors of structures (Giddens 1991), and there is interdependency between agency and structure.

Analysing the interplay between agent and structure, the individual and the society, Giddens (1984, 1991) introduces his concepts of structuration and the knowledgeability of human agents. Characterising social structure as "dual", Giddens sees structure as a process rather than a static state, and thus it must not be simply conceptualised as putting constraints on human agency, but also as enabling (Giddens 1984, 161). Social structure is thus dynamic, interactive: it is constituted not only by properties but also relations; it is in a process of continuing, transformation and reproduction.

Meanwhile, to be a human being, to Giddens, is "to know, virtually all of the time, in terms of some description or another, both what one is doing and why one is doing it", and as such human agents continuously monitor the circumstances of their activities (Giddens 1991, 35). At the same time, human self monitoring always has a discursive nature: "agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage" (Giddens 1979, 55). Human agency and structure according to Giddens thus "presuppose" each other (Giddens 1979, 53). There is a mutual relationship between structure and agency: structures determine human practices, but human practices also shape structures.

It is this view highlighting the interplay between the dynamic social structure with the knowledgeable human agents that makes it possible to associate the concepts of "agency" and "structure" with "social contract". Social contract, as a sociological concept, is characterised "by an agreement between two or more parties, underpinned by informed consent, where there is reasonable trust that the expectations of a future outcome will be met" (Rawolle 2013, 233-234). In a social contract, the parties can be individuals, groups, institutions or nations, and their transactions are embedded in social networks (Robin 2012, Rawolle 2013). Social contract has a core principle of social reciprocity, or mutuality (Yeatman 2000, Robin 2012, Rawolle 2013). The underpinnings of social contract include trust, commitments, mutual expectations and obligations, and reciprocal social bargains (Rawolle 2013). In this way, "social contract" specifies the

relationship between social structure and human agents: they are parties with mutual understanding of rights and obligations and the realisation of the contract is driven by acknowledging and considering each party's agency.

What is professionalism?

Acknowledging the complexities of "professionalism", researchers have attempted to read this concept from different perspectives. In the literature on professionalism, two main meta-level approaches have been used to conceptualise the notion. The first approach sees professionalism from a trait-based perspective; it is interpreted as a set of features that an occupation should have in order to be termed a profession (Whitty 2008; Evans 2010; Lester 2011). The second approach focuses more on the critical aspect and treats professionalism as resulting from particular ideologies or social systems (Ozga 1995; Weiner 2002; Hudson 2009). The issues discussed in studies following this approach often include status, positioning, and legitimation.

This paper resonates with Gewirtz et al.'s (2009, 4) view seeing professionalism "both as a mode of social coordination and as shorthand for a (shifting and contested) set of occupational virtues". Evetts (2013, 8) also agrees that since "professionalism" is regarded as a discourse, this has, to an extent, "combined the occupational value and the ideological interpretations". Similarly, my paper holds that "professionalism" is an always politically embedded notion whether it is interpreted from an occupational-value perspective or a critical perspective. A list of aspired traits and features cannot come out of a vacuum, and since they are value embedded, whether to the occupation or to a power or ideology, there seems to be always the question of power involved. For teachers, "doing a good job" cannot be separated out from a concern about individual and collective autonomy and power (Gewirtz et al. 2009). In other words, the descriptive question of "What is professionalism?" cannot be separated from the other political questions of "Who has the power to decide what counts as professionalism? And for whose interest?"; at the same time, to seek the answer to the political questions it is necessary to take into account in the first place the descriptive question.

Adopting this perspective towards how to read "professionalism", it seems that "agency" and "structure" can be useful because the two concepts deal with the relationship between human individuals and social discourse and the question of power and primacy.

Professionalism as structure and professionals as agents: "from above" and "from within"

One important concept that has been closely discussed with "professionalism" is "professionalism" - the process that shapes or creates professionalism. In current literature, "professionalization" is found to entail different nuances but it seems two main interpretations can be identified. "Professionalisation" of work refers to the process of raising the status or to validate the value of occupational groups (Weiner 2002; Evetts 2009). In this way of professionalisation, external rules are minimised to give place for trust and recognition to the professionals given their special status and recognised competences (Freidson 2001, 34). On the other hand, "professionalization" can be perceived as a process of occupational control (Ozga 1995, 21), and to legitimate "disparate neo-liberal government policies" (Weiner 2002, 277). As such, professionalisation can be associated with "strategy" (McClelland 1990) or even becomes "professionalising project" (Larson 1977). The professionalising project is conducted to achieve particular goals. As such, it seems that these two readings of "professionalization" are based on an interest-based principle that the work possesses particular values either to the public or to the benefits of the state or an elite (Freidson 2001, 214). What distinguishes them perhaps lies in "who" has the "power" to initiate the professionalisation process. Again, the political question of "Who can decide what counts as professionalism?" needs to be considered. With this stance, the paper adopts the categorisation of professionalisation by McClelland (1990) which differentiates professionalisation "from within" and "from above". Professionalisation "from within", as McClelland (1990, 107) puts it, is regarded as the attempt to successfully manipulate the market, or even the state, by the occupational group for its own benefits, while professionalism "from above"

means a domination of forces external to the group. As such, this conceptualisation reflects the very question of how much power and autonomy occupational groups and individuals have in creating their own standards.

The contemporary higher education professionalism: professionalisation "from above"?

The contemporary interpretation of professionalism can be said to have started in the 1970s which expanded from the more critical literature on professions which was prominent in Anglo-American studies of the time (Lester 2011). This time witnesses the significant influence of external structure such as the state or local authority on teacher professionalism as it was more legislatively driven and controlled (Larson 1977). This trend of professionalisation continues to the present day with a discourse of control used by managers in work organisations, which results in what is termed as managerial professionalism and organisational professionalism (Sachs 2003; Whitty 2008; Evetts 2009). Legitimatised through the promulgation of policies and the allocation of funds with the policies, managerial professionalism is mandated by the state (Day and Sachs 2004) and is driven by a discourse of control of system, external regulation, and standardised procedures (Whitty 2008). At the level of organisation, organisational professionalism is characterised by a discourse of control used increasingly by managers in work organisations, hierarchical rational-legal forms of authority, standardisation, externalised forms of regulations and accountability measures (Evetts 2009, 23).

In this way, although "professionalism" is perceived as being socially constructed, the current emphasis seems to be placed on the dominant role of external forces. "Professionalism" thus is regarded as the outcome of "professionalization" projects which constraint academics and the profession rather than enabling them (Evetts 2009; Lester 2011). The organisational professionalism regulates and replaces occupational control of the practitioner/client work interactions (Evetts 2009, 23). In other words, the contemporary professionalism is seen as being constructed and imposed "from above", using McClelland's interpretation (Evetts 2009). The professionalisation "from above" creates a "from above" "professionalism": professionalism is being constructed and imposed by the employers and managers and not the traditional occupational values (Evetts 2009, 22).

Placed in contemporary higher education, "professionalism" takes up additional political dimensions that go beyond occupational elements. In many parts of the world there seems to be an enormous interest, politically and administratively, by governments, bureaucracies, and businesses, in identifying, codifying, and applying professional standards to teachers (Hargreaves and Goodson 1996, 1). The discourses of the knowledge economy and the "new managerialism" are said to have adjusted or re-positioned the work and identities of teachers (Deem and Brehony 2005, Loveless and Williamson 2013).

University teachers in the professionalism discourse: trapped by the "from above" discourse?

As mentioned earlier, the contemporary discourse of professionalism has been perceived to have profound effects on professional work and identities. The present professionalism, long associated with managerialism, has been described to have transformed the conceptions of what it meant to be a professional (Apple 2009, xiv). The professionalisation "from above" emphasises performance, accountability, measurement, productivity and requires one to be regulated and act "appropriately" by having "appropriate" work identities, conducts and practices (Apple 2009; Sachs 2013). Critiques describe the influences of this professionalising project as damaging: it deskills teachers, de-professionalises them, and destroys their academic soul (Ozga 1995; Ball 2003, 2012).

In another critique, Power (2008, 145) uses "professional imagination" to enable professionals to make sense of the contemporary challenges of professional life. Power conceptualises the difficulty of being a contemporary professional by her depiction of "the distressed professional" (in terms of individual and/or institutional failings), and "the oppressed

professional" (in terms of structural forces beyond the individual or the institution). Meanwhile, Barnett (2008) is concerned about the uncertainties of being a professional in "an age of supercomplexity". Not only that the professional now lives with multiple identities, he or she "neither has his or her "professionalism" given in any real sense nor has carte blanche to shape it" (Barnett 2008, 196).

Professionalism as a social contract

The possibility of a "from within" professionalism

Professionalism cannot seem to exist without the exercise of practitioners' will and power. To say it differently, professionalism has a nature of "from within".

To start with, the word "professionalism" can be de-constructed into the noun "profession", and historically "profession" applied to only three "great professions of divinity, law, and physics" (Prest 1987, quoted in Hudson 2009, 19). In his review article, Crook (2008) provides a description of how the so-called "classical professions" and "professional elites" of theology, medicine, and law emerged with the development of the modern state. The mid-nineteenth century saw the expansion of "old professions" to include university academics in Britain and across Western Europe and North America and as a result of a "professionalization" of higher education driven by meritocracy, urbanisation, industrialisation, imperialism, modernisation and scientific rationality (Crook 2008, 14). These historical accounts imply that from the early day "professionalism" already entails a process of practitioners and occupational groups seeking for recognition, whether it is for an "individualised professionalism" with which professionals strive to win customers trust and satisfaction and recognition, or for a political, ideological professionalism that serves the benefits of its occupational groups or of a particular ideology or power structures. Professionalism, in one sense, constitutes the amalgam of individual's professionalities - the qualities that a practitioner needs to have to be a professional (Evans 2008).

Hoyle (1974, 15) defines professionalism as strategies and rhetorics used by members of an occupation in seeking for better status, salary and conditions. As such, professionalisation in this sense happens voluntarily through the acquiring of the aspirational attributes. Consequently "professionalization" is indeed not always negative, and controlled. It is the desirable important characteristics that entitle professionals and professional associations to rights, power and privileges. Historically these are the motives for "professionalisation project", especially for specialist occupations during the Industrial Revolution such as the priesthood, university teaching, law and physicianship (Lester 2011). Attempts to professionalise a particular occupation are motivated by practitioners' wish to gain control of their field. "Successful" professionalisation is perceived as the "domination of the conditions under which professionals exercises their occupations, whether described as "autonomy" or 'market monopolisation" (McClelland 1990, 98). Not only they will have market share - the control can provide autonomy that help them move away from market and bureaucratic forces to some degree (Freidson 2001).

Moreover, professionalism, and the professionalism discourse, is not always necessarily a battlefield where practitioners' professionalism, and their process of professionalising have to confront the "outside" discourse. In other words, "from within" professionalism can be inextricably linked with "from above" professionalism. The interests of practitioners, or professionals, can in many cases, be in line with those of the "from above" forces. Traditionally the notion "professionalism" is interpreted in sociology with an importance for the stability and civility of social systems (Evetts 2009). Professionalism, as discussed in the next section, is a social contract, and since it is a "contract", all parties involved have their own voices and responsibilities.

Professionalism as a social contract: an interpretation of Freidson's "Third Logic"

Professionalism, as explored in the previous section in connection with "professionalization", can be understood beyond the binary either-or classification of professionalisation "from within" or "from above". Furthermore, "from within" and "from above"

professionalisms can well co-exist yet not resist nor oppose each other. It is rather a social contract where involving parties have, and are aware of, their own rights and responsibilities, as well as those of others'.

Built on the view that interprets professionalism as a socially constructed concept, and given its stance arguing for the interconnection of the "from within" and "from above" nature in conceptualising "professionalism", the paper shifts the concentration to practitioners and their role in this process by discussing professionalism as a social contract. To justify this an interpretation of Freidson's "Professionalism: The Third Logic" (2001), considered among the important works on professionalism, will be provided.

In this book, Freidson (2001) calls professionalism "The Third Logic" in discussion with the logics of the free market and of the bureaucracy or firm. While professionals are identified with expertise, which entails autonomy, their logic needs to interact with the other two logics: that of the market that celebrates customer satisfaction, competition and cost, and that of bureaucracy that promotes efficiency through standardisation and regulation. Although Freidson emphasises that the three logics directly differ, he also notes that professionalism, the Third Logic, interacts with the other two: "Even when those called professionals are something more than average people, few can be immune to the constraints surrounding the work they do" (Freidson 2001, 12). For Freidson, individuals can hardly actively concern themselves with their occupational professionalism if the institutions and circumstances surrounding them fail to support. Professionalism is subject to sources of social order as Freidson acknowledges the question of how occupations are nurtured and controlled is central. In this sense, professionalism is understood beyond the scope of a set of occupational attributes, either individually or collectively. Professionals have a "contract" with the wider society (Gewirtz et al. 2009, 4). The relationship between professionals and the society is based on trust: professionals are entitled to be trusted, but they also need to work to win that trust. As Gewirtz et al. (2009, 4) put it, professionalism needs to be "both a regime of control and ideology". In other words, the concept of professionalism contains not only aspired idealistic occupational virtues but it involves other interactions between the professionals and the society.

However, this social contract is not without tensions and even contradictions. In an ideal world Freidson's three logics can work in harmony and they become a single logic: professional virtues and attributes are not contested, trust is completely in place, and there is no conflict between aspiration and reality commands. However, as the three logics exist separately, their interactions may turn out to be conflicting, especially when there exists a conflict of interests. Freidson highlights these contradictions between professionalism and the market and the bureaucracy as:

> "…monopoly is essential to professionalism which directly opposes it to the logic of competition in a free market. Freedom of judgement or discretion in performing work is also intrinsic to professionalism, which directly contradicts the managerial notion that efficiency is gained by minimizing discretion" (Freidson 2001, 3).

Whether the interactions are fruitful or not, nevertheless, professionalism will always in the first place have a coordination relationship with the other logics - the external social forces, involving acknowledging, negotiating, trading off, sacrificing or even demolishing and surrendering.

University teachers: signing the social contract of professionalism?

With the contemporary discourse of teacher professionalism depicted with more focus on its controlling dimension - it is a form of social determinism, the practitioner, or the professional, are seen as being regulated to respond to the system. However, given the argument discussed earlier, the discourse of professionalism is dynamic and is not easy to be regarded as being created "from within" or "from above"; rather, the two dimensions can be said to interlink which gives the concept a socially constructed nature in which teachers and social structure interact and respond to each other.

Indeed, teaching seems to be one of the occupations where practitioners have the opportunity to exercise their agency. Teaching, including teaching in higher education, teachers are able to preserve their control of how they work with learners in the classroom despite changing mandates

(Knight 2003). In particular, being a university educator implies a special status brought about by expertise and merit and characterised by academic freedom (Getman 1992). Teaching is a process that involves independent professional decision-making (Leung 2013). Structures have impact, yet teachers may often find space to avoid accommodating their existing practices to new mandates and find ways to make the mandates fit what they value and feel easy doing (Knight 2003). However, teachers do not act in isolation with their conditions. As Leung (2013, 22) puts it, professionalism is not a natural phenomenon but it is "best seen as a form of temporary consensus among key stakeholders." In their work, teachers have a multiple positioning: they position themselves politically and socially to their audience (peer teachers, students, the wider community) by their own modification and accommodation (Leander and Osborne 2008).

That teachers are not passive agents implies that in understanding the relationship between teachers and their discourse more than a social determinism perspective is necessary. Alongside with critical accounts conceptualising the contemporary "from above" discourse of professionalism with its damaging impact towards teacher professionals, recently there has been more empirical evidence on how there exists a responsive relationship between teacher agency and social structure. Research increasingly starts to shift the emphasis to agency at a local, specific level and shows how teachers' response and react to externally driven change, especially educational reform and curriculum change. For example, in her research in a UK university, Clegg (2008, 329) points out that despite all the pressure of performativity and managerialism, teachers still "create spaces for the exercise of principled personal autonomy and agency" describing their identities in terms of what they value. Similarly, Borg (2013) observes in his research that teachers have a way to compromise between striving for professional legitimacy and realising their own values and priorities. In their research conducted in the context of education reform in the US, Leander and Osborne (2008) finds that teachers establish a responsive relationship between their positioning, identity and practices with their contexts. Priestley, Edwards, and Priestley (2012) with their study in a school in Scotland also emphasise the interaction between teachers and the discourse: teachers have different potential for agency, and this is dependant on temporal conditions. On the other hand, it has been observed that social structure, in this case educational policies of different levels can be read as referencing social contracts between different parties and underpinning three principles of informed consent, points of renegotiation at specific times while they are enacted (Rawolle 2013).

All of the above suggests that teacher agency, in particular university teacher agency, needs further exploration in terms of how it dynamically interplays with social structure in co-constructing the discourse of professionalism. More specifically, this relationship may be regarded as a social contract where each party responds to each other's expectation while fulfil their obligation in order to optimise the outcome of the contract. These empirical studies mentioned above on the one hand highlight how teachers achieve and enact their agency, and respond to social discourse; on the other hand, they could be interpreted as illustrating how teachers and social structure work together to achieve a form of "win-win" solution. At this point I am proposing social contract as a potential lens to reimagine professionalism. As discussed earlier, given that professionalism, as structure, has the dynamic nature where "from within" and "from above" dimensions, and that professionals, as agents, are knowledgeable actors who are active and responsive, it seems professionalism can be explained to follow the logic of social contract: reciprocity. This opens up a possibility for a re-conceptualisation of "professionalism" beyond the view that sees the notion as being deterministically created by social structure and that gives professionals little room for agency. Moreover, social contract seems relevant for exploring the relationship between professionals and the discourse of professionalism since it provides a theoretical way to understand society and society and social changes at multiple levels of analysis and in multiple contexts, especially the connection between individual and public issues (Rubin 2012).

Concluding remarks and implications for teacher education

By discussing the complexity of professionalism as possessing an interconnected nature of "from within" and "from above" discourses, the paper has argued that the notion can be interpreted from a perspective that reconciles the structure/agency dichotomy rather than a view regarding social structure as being deterministic towards individual professionals. To be more specifically, "professionalism" can be read as a "social contract" between the knowledgeable actors and the society. This is a contract where participating parties all have roles regardless whether the contract may encompass tensions and contradictions. However being under a contract also means at some point the contradictions will have to be negotiated and resolved in a way. This argument raises the need for further exploring the realities of how university teachers perceive and respond to the contemporary discourse of professionalism surrounding them. Additional understanding of university teachers' work and their perception of the profession and professional self will also inform the design and implementation of faculty professional support activities as well as teacher preparation programmes that emphasise "education" along with "training". Also, the decision-making process on both micro-level by individual teachers and macro-level by "structure" authorities will also benefit in consideration of the interconnectedness of professionalism as a social contract.

Acknowledgements

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