

INVESTIGACIONES

STRIVING TO BE PROFESSIONAL IN A POST- PROFESSIONAL WORLD.

LA BÚSQUEDA POR SER UN PROFESIONAL EN UN MUNDO “POST-PROFESIONAL”

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RESUMEN

Este artículo describe la metodología y resultados de una investigación desarrollada en Nueva Zelanda durante el 2009, que examina la postura de los orientadores para la carrera en relación a los discursos tradicionales y contemporáneos de la “profesión” en Nueva Zelanda. Adoptando una perspectiva Foucauldiana, se estudia la relación entre las influencias ambientales y las representaciones de los orientadores, respecto a su identidad ocupacional, a través de dos posturas identificadas durante el estudio: el [profesional] “reflexivo” constructivo y el pragmático esencialista. Los críticos reflexivos se identifican con constructos relacionados con la concepción tradicional de profesión, como poseer una sólida base teórica o académica, estar cualificado/a para el puesto y guiarse por un código ético. Los pragmáticos esencialistas defienden que su identidad profesional depende de características innatas, esenciales o fijas. Prefieren el conocimiento basado en la práctica, siguiendo su intuición y desconfiando de lo académico. Aunque también acentúan la importancia de un código ético, su enfoque ante los cambios es pragmático.

A medida que los constructos tradicionales se van considerando anticuados, los críticos reflexivos deben resituarse dentro de este “nuevo profesionalismo”, pero lamentan la pérdida de tener una profesión. Las posibilidades de resistencia son limitadas. Sin embargo, el post-profesionalismo amenaza ahora al nuevo profesionalismo, yendo hacia un futuro incierto. En la investigación, se aplica una metodología construccionista, y se analizan los resultados de la misma antes de sacar conclusiones.

ABSTRACT

Taking a Foucauldian perspective, this paper examines career practitioners’ positioning against traditional and contemporary discourses of ‘profession’ in New Zealand. It determines two subject positions. Critical reflectors identify with traditional constructs of having a profession, predicated on academic qualifications, knowledge and ethics.

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Essentialised pragmatists identify with 'new professionalism,' distrusting academic knowledge, preferring intuition and behaving professionally. As traditional constructs are repositioned as antiquated, critical reflectors must relocate themselves within 'new professionalism,' but mourn the loss of having a profession. Possibilities of resistance are limited. However, post-professionalism now threatens new professionalism, leading to an uncertain future.

Key Words: Career, advice, guidance, professionalism, Foucault, discourse, resistance.

Introduction and the Foucauldian Perspective

This paper is based on research conducted in New Zealand during 2009, and examines the relationship between environmental influences and career practitioners' representations of their occupational identity through two positions, the constructive reflector and the essentialised pragmatist. The paper takes Foucauldian perspective to discourse and technologies of domination, and discusses the literature regarding the professional subject from this position. The methodology accords with a constructionist approach, and the research finding is discussed from this context before conclusions are drawn.

A Foucauldian perspective understands the world as socially constructed through discourses, which are influential societal representations of 'truth,' formed and communicated within language, through writing, speaking and action. An example is neo-liberalism which is "a new ideology for a new individualised society" (Bauman, 2008, p. 20) and which, through a process of deregulation and enterprise has changed systematically the face of social service provision such as career advice, guidance and counselling (CAGC), privatising and/or contracting out delivery. Discourses are fluid, nevertheless, they influence "how ideas are put into practice" (Hall, 2001a, p. 72) and regulate behaviour or 'conduct.' Their influence is profound, creating "the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 2002a, p. 54). They are propagated through coherent mechanisms called 'discursive formations.' (Foucault, 2002b).

Foucault talks of 'regimes' of government and practices (Foucault, 1991) that emanate from discursive formations. These regulate the acquisition, management and use of knowledge. This is the management of power. Analysing these regimes enables understanding of what influences and governs knowledge and its implementation. The individual, referred to as the 'subject,' is positioned within disciplinary regimes and is governed through 'technologies.' Technologies of domination exert pressure on the subject to behave in particular ways thus objectivising them. Technologies of the self cause the subject to render themselves visible to scrutiny, to engage in self-judgment and alter their behaviour to align with the dominant discourses (Foucault, 1997).

Positioning the Professional

'Profession' and 'professional' are contested concepts as this review will show. 'Profession' is customarily defined through a series of traits, including theory-based complex knowledge, lengthy university-based training, a high degree of autonomy and adherence to codes of ethics (Leicht & Fennel, 2001), constituting ideal-types

(see Weber, 1978; 1924/1990; and Durkheim, 1957). More recently, occupations have sought to achieve professional status through a calculated process, or the 'professional project' (Larson, 1977). Here, the occupation appropriates and delineates language and knowledge, transforming it into the dominant discourse that aligns it with the traits of a profession. From a Foucauldian perspective, these traits are a discursive formation, a form of truth. Measuring an occupation against them legitimates it. This is a deliberate attempt to achieve 'social closure,' a term Larson borrows from Weber, to elevate the status of occupation in public perception. The rise of the discourse of new professionalism combined with environmental complexity, threatens this traditional definition. It is positioned as unattainable, an "antiquated" (O'Regan, 2001, p. 224) false promise.

New professionalism is the deliberate discursive formation to embed regime changes eventuated by neo-liberalism, which challenge the exclusivity and autonomy of the traditional professional. The professional is subjected to disciplinary technologies, via domination and the self. Domination is exerted through managerial control via regimes of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, target setting and achievement, and performance measurement (Pollitt, 2006). Technologies of the self occur as professionals become self critical (Stronach et al, 2002) and through processes such as appraisal they are encouraged to identify more closely with the new regime, to confess their successes and shortcomings and to modify their behaviour according to managerial requirements. Although Woods and Jeffrey (2002) find new professionalism deprofessionalising, Hargreaves (1994) emphasises "positive outcomes" (p. 424), particularly in dismantling the exclusivity of knowledge, and placing organisational development as an essential precursor to improving professional practice.

Competence and competency become the disciplinary tools of new professionalism (Svensson, 2006). 'Competence' is the minimum standard against which performance and outputs are demonstrated and measured (CIPD, 2010) and competency governs conduct by inculcating the subject with the required behaviour to ensure high performance levels (ibid). Practical knowledge prevails "over theoretical knowledge and formal education" (Fournier, 2000, p. 590). For Fournier (1999), the competency movement reinforces disciplinary technologies in which "truth and knowledge are translated into a code of appropriate conduct" (p. 287). This subjectifies the professional, producing the right sort of person. New professionalism signals a significant change in defining and understanding professions, focusing on the professional subject rather than the profession. Nevertheless, this is transitive, and by focusing solely on the subject's behaviour, fails to acknowledge the implications of on-going environmental change particularly in technology.

Post-professionalism recognises political influence and the impact of technology on open access to knowledge (Kritzer, 1999), which alters the balance of power. Post-professionalism argues that formal professions have lost their exclusivity; increased specialisation dissipates their unique abstract knowledge and this is exacerbated by technological developments (Kritzer, 1999; Burns, 2007). Professions are dismantled into routine jobs for "specialized general professionals or non-professionals" (Kritzer, 1999, p. 720), and new lower paid technician-level occupations challenge 'professional' exclusivity. Cheaper and expedient, they resolve shortages of staff and specialist knowledge, e.g. in pathology (Douglas, Corby, & White, 2002). Here, biomedical scientists circumvent the traditional lengthy but

arguably inappropriate general medical training, focusing specifically on histopathology in a new post-professional occupation.

New and post-professional characteristics are clearly identifiable within the New Zealand CAGC context. Contract-based provision emphasises economy and efficiency. Practitioners emphasise professional ways of being over professional ways of knowing. They may be recruited without related qualifications, although the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ) requires a level six qualification (sub-degree) or above for professional membership. New regimes emphasise technologically based, open-access knowledge. Face to face interactions in which practitioner exercises professional skill and judgment are altered to technological interactions whose outcomes are driven by contractors or clients.

Methodology

Aligning with post structuralism using a Foucauldian perspective, the methodology is interpretive, using qualitative methods. This position understands the world as socially constructed, constantly altering and therefore subjective. This approach reflects different ways of knowing (Wetherell, 2008), and is part of a movement to “give voice to those left silenced and oppressed.” (Gwyther & Possamai-Inesedy, 2009, p. 111). It focuses on smaller groups examining their experiences in depth. The method complements the post-structural turn to language (Burman & Parker, 1993; Harre & Gillett, 1994) to produce knowledge to make sense of the world (Hall, 2001b).

Potter and Wetherell's (1987) systematic, theoretical ten-stage framework of discourse analysis was used. This is a very specific form of discourse analysis that locates the utterance within “the local and broader discursive systems” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 169), rather than focusing on the minutiae of the utterance as with Fairclough, (2003) or on critical discourse analysis (e.g van Dijk, 2006; 2008). Data collection was through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 35 participants from a range of public and private CAGC organisations throughout New Zealand. Analysis involved coding to identify analytic units which are then analysed to understand how the response is constructed and the function it serves within the interaction. The constructions are used to create reality; functions are used by the subject to explain, justify or blame. Variations provide insight into how the subject communicates differently at different stages of the interview. Variations are as important as consistency because the subject uses them unconsciously to formulate their answer according to their situation or the context of the interaction. Extracts from the transcripts are used as representative illustrations (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Once the analysis is complete, the findings may then be interpreted in the broader societal, Foucauldian meaning of discourse.

Research Finding

The analysis identified two broad groups. Firstly, the critical reflectors who affiliated strongly with the traditional professional subject position, in particular working to a code of ethics, possessing a theoretical knowledge-base and being

qualified for the job. They are deeply unhappy at regime changes, which they understand as undermining CAGC as a profession. The second group comprise the essentialised pragmatists who define their professional identity as emanating from essentialised or fixed, innate personal characteristics. They are uncomfortable with academic knowledge, preferring practically-based theoretical knowledge, calling on intuition as the basis for their practice. Although they too emphasise the importance of a code of ethics, they take a pragmatic approach to the changes.

New professionalism was clearly the most predominant representation used by the respondents, with disciplinary technologies of domination evident in the imperative of the financial bottom-line. The working environment for all the organisations studied is contract-based and outcome-driven, although in some settings, this is tacit rather than overt. Financial imperatives prevail, “it’s resources, pure and simple” (Lyndon) and internal organisational funding allocations are highly competitive:

You’re competing for resources, lots of fundamental rivalry in the institution. You know. One of the pro-vice chancellors said to me, and he’s so right ‘You are a tax. You’re seen as a tax.’ So what you’ve always got to do is make sure it’s a tax that academics see as being happy to pay. Yeah, that they get some value from it. (Oliver).

Indicative of the neo-liberal discourses underpinning new professionalism, Iris equates professionalism with customer service. This represents professionalism as ‘quality’ equalling profit. She begins her statement with a disclaimer, a verbal device to deflect “potentially obnoxious attributions” which always follow (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 176).

Now this sounds awful, I’m going to bring it back to monetary terms, quality equals profit. Quality equals profit, and profit’s not always money, it’s about customer satisfaction, it’s about job satisfaction, it’s about stakeholder satisfaction. And we believe that if we get our day-to-day dealings with people right, then that equates to the organisation’s profit. (Iris)

Despite the qualifiers, her point is that professional behaviour equals monetary profit. The regimes of practices governing practitioners mean they adapt their behaviour, language and appearance to fulfil this. This shift, implemented by “power techniques oriented towards individuals and intended to rule them in a continuous and permanent way” (Foucault, 1979, p. 227) is a significant move from the altruistic perspective held by the critical reflectors.

Technologies of the self are evident in the practitioners’ behaviour and conduct. For example, Petula, an essentialised pragmatist, emphasises being ‘professional’ rather than having a ‘profession.’ Appropriate behaviour and attitudes supersede traits of lengthy training and exclusive academic knowledge.

To me, in terms of attitude, it’s all about the level of service and delivery and effort that you put into performing the tasks well and in an obliging manner. (Petula)

She is emphatic:

I’m really clear about this; any person in any role could be a professional, of attitude, in what they do. Petula, her emphasis)

This illustrates 'professionalism' as a disciplinary logic (Fournier, 1999), in which inculcated expectations of behaviour displace professional autonomy. This is the discursive formation of 'customer service' (Fournier, 2000; Svensson, 2006).

Critical reflectors express deep-felt unhappiness at this new professional environment, e.g.:

I am feeling like a cog. I am feeling less in control of my own pathway within an organisation that has always given me that. It's the changes. I have felt demeaned by the process of restructuring. Professionally demeaned, as a professional who has always been in charge of her own path, I feel more controlled, rightly or wrongly. (Stephanie)

This group understand and affiliate strongly with professional traits, but practise within a new professional environment. The disciplinary power from the technologies of domination are exerted through audit and quality cultures, and practitioners are controlled at a distance through meeting contract requirements. These become normalised and practitioners adjust their behaviour

And how do I feel about it? I feel... this is my employer and if this is what they are saying we have to do, and if this is the direction we're going to go in, if we can have more impact on more people and be helpful and influence a greater number of people's career decisions then I say fantastic. And If I don't like it, then go and find another employer. (Delia)

Foucault (2002a) identifies the discontinuous nature of discourse, and technological change challenges the regime of new professionalism. The new environment is increasingly post-professional; technology is a fundamental medium that changes work practices and how practitioners construct their professional identity:

I have many fears and anxieties about how my job is being re-shaped. (Stephanie)

Where does that leave the face-to-face work? (Kalina)

Critical reflector practitioners are struggling to position themselves within their uncertain environment. They resort to personal values as heartfelt rhetorical constructions, and use these consistently to explain and justify their traditional position.

Career practice to me is a role where I can feel that I am helping people in quite a practical way. Making a real difference with people, and in a very real sense, meeting their needs. (John)

That's a very strong thing that's important to me, to be able to work with integrity. (Rosa)

I find my own personal values are very aligned to my role. Values like respect for other people, honesty, of openness, of contributing, of celebrating people, recognising what it is they want to do and achieving the values of respecting diversity, and of respecting people who have values that are quite different to your own. (Oliver)

Foucault (1982) argues that power cannot exist without resistance, and resistance may occur through parody and mockery (Hodgson, 2005), avoidance (Boon, 2007) or manipulation (Gleeson & Knights, 2006). A sub group within the

critical reflectors sought to resist the disciplinary logic of new professionalism. Contrary to the put up or get out position expressed by Delia, the resisters have limited options. Interestingly, their resistance is constructed around personal values rather than the erosion of their professional knowledge and expertise. The personal values are used as a function to resist neo-liberal discursive formations, and a reason to exit the environment.

I do feel loyalty to the organisation, as long as it remains an organisation that is in line with my values. That might sound a little bit narrow, I don't know. But basically, when the organisation or if the organisation ceases to align with my values, that would have to be when I move. (John)

This was no idle threat:

FD: What do you feel about these changes?

We don't feel great about them. I'm actually moving, I've just, yeah I'm going to be leaving, I've just got a new job. (Poppy)

The group constitute a form of resistance that seeks to maintain a preferred identity over an imposed one. This resistance is constructed by Craig (2006) as "professional conservatism" (p. 65) of older practitioners who are ossified within a particular paradigm of practice. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is indicative of the conflict between two discourses of professionalism, the traditional and the 'new,' in which the latter uses disciplinary technologies of domination to observe practitioners and 'normalise' recalcitrant behaviour, encouraging them to reform themselves according to the new regimes of competence and competency. This is the shift from having a profession to behaving professionally (Hargreaves, 2000). Resistance indicates a level of unheard, unrecognised unhappiness in which subjects align with having once had a profession and mourn its loss. For them, alternatives are limited, as Stephanie voices "I feel just a bit stuck at the moment."

Conclusions

The positioning of the professional subject in the literature assumes a high level of compliance. Resistance is frequently located as cynical, through mockery, parody, avoidance or manipulation. This study finds personal values at odds with the dominant discursive formation of the neo-liberal construct of new professionalism. Two discernable groups emerged from the research, constructive reflectors and essentialised pragmatists. The constructive reflectors value a theoretical knowledge base and being appropriately academically qualified. They identify with the subject position of having a profession. Although O'Regan (2001) warns that traditional constructions of profession are an antiquated false promise, they remain an important anchor for this group. The changing environment has created tensions and discomfort for them, and they expressed feelings of being demeaned by outcome-driven bottom line regimes that circumvent professional judgment and marginalise their altruistic motives of social good. Confronted by limited avenues for resistance, they call on personal values to define their professional identity, rather than complying with the new regimes. Conversely, the essentialised pragmatists feel threatened by academic knowledge. They emphasise behaviour, instinct, innate

personal characteristics and a hands-on approach. This group identify with the subject position of being professional, i.e. as a mode of behaviour. They align with the disciplinary technologies aimed at achieving this “If I don’t like it, then go and find another employer.” (Delia).

Career advice, guidance and counselling as a profession in the traditional sense emerges as a *passé* construct, whose loss is mourned by the constructive reflectors. This indicates a successful embedding of the discursive formation of new professionalism, which emphasizes behaviour. However, this position is becoming eclipsed by the technological changes of post-professionalism, the implications of which are, as yet, unclear.

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