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**Professionalism and professional development:
what these research fields look like today – and what tomorrow should bring**

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Abstract

In this article an experienced academic presents a brief summary of key areas of research and scholarship that reflect her interests and expertise. With a focus both on recent developments in the field and the author's contribution to it, new conceptualisations of professionalism and professional development are outlined, and the relationship between the two concepts is highlighted. Linda Evans argues that professionalism is no longer an exclusive, merit-laden label applicable only to those employed in what are considered the 'classic' professions: the law, medicine and the church; it is a term used to denote people's being in any work context. Professionalism is also presented as the basis of professional development, with change to one or more of its eleven dimensions (as conceived by the author) constituting professional development.

Introduction

When asked by new acquaintances what is my field of research, I usually go straight in with the catch-all label that I've chosen for my 'box': *professional working life*. If I then discern any hint of puzzlement or uncertainty in my interlocutor's response (and often even if I don't), I add clarity by lifting the lid and revealing the box's contents one by one, rattling them off in quick succession: professionalism, professional development and professional learning, researcher development, professional cultures, workplace attitudes (especially morale, job satisfaction and motivation), and leadership – particularly the perspectives of 'the led' – including leadership in higher education, academic leadership and research leadership, and, I add, I have recently added academic identity to the list. These interest and fascinate me and have been the focus of my research for over two decades.

To the untrained eye they may appear a miscellany – even a mish-mash - of topics; to me, they are all so inextricably linked that I struggle to talk about any one of them without bringing up the others. Indeed, it is their linkage that drew me to each of them, one leading me on to the next, and then the next, and so on. I often feel that the research component of an academic career is like losing oneself in a network of pathways that becomes tantalisingly frustrating the further one ventures along it, faced with increasingly more side paths that branch off invitingly than one will ever have the time to explore. Writing this article will pose something of a challenge, for out of the many side paths that I have explored during my academic career I have picked just two to briefly revisit here. My explorations of them revealed to me quite some time ago that professionalism and professional development are intertwined paths that criss-cross and border each other to such an extent that, at times, I have struggled to distinguish between them. Below, I outline how and why I came to that conclusion, and try to lead readers much further down these paths than they have ventured before – revealing them to stretch out into the distance much further than most people imagine. I begin by sharing what I have discovered in exploring the *professionalism* path.

Professionalism

I am always pleased to receive invitations to speak on professionalism, seeing them as opportunities to broaden people's perspectives as I share my own. But such pleasure is tempered with apprehension because I know from experience that, whilst I may very well stimulate and engage most of them, I shall also end up confounding at least one member of my audience. People naturally bring their preconceptions to a seminar or keynote whose title includes the word 'professionalism', for the word is quite widely used in non-academic contexts, so everyone has an idea of what it means. And unless they have researched professionalism in any depth and explored how it is defined and used by academics like me, who interrogate and dissect its evolving meaning and applications, their preconceptions are, quite understandably and legitimately, grounded in their everyday usage of the term. To

them, professionalism (along with its etymological derivatives, such as *profession* and *professional*) is something desirable; merit-laden – something commendable and praiseworthy; something to pursue and to claim; something whose loss is regrettable.

It is such perceptions that I like to challenge, for in the sociology of professions interpretations of professionals and professionalism have moved on considerably since the days when only a small number of occupations were categorised as professions (the ‘classic’ professions: law, medicine and the clergy), and professionalism was an exclusive club. Interpretations of professionalism have even moved on considerably from the relatively more recent days (with which some readers will be familiar) when it was debated whether or not teachers and nurses, though falling short of meriting ‘classic’ professional status, should be called semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969). What we now have are key international players – leading academics - associated with this substantive field sketching out new understandings of professionalism that correspond with the realities of 21st century working life. So, for example, Julia Evetts (2013, p. 779) argues that we need ‘to look again at the theories and concepts used to explain and interpret this category of occupational work’ – by ‘this category of occupational work’ she means professionalism. ‘[D]efinitional precision (about what is a profession) is now regarded more as a time-wasting diversion’, she observes; ‘To most researchers in the field it no longer seems important to draw a hard and fast line between professions and occupations but, instead, to regard both as similar social forms which share many common characteristics’ (Evetts, 2013, p. 780). Then there is Dutch professor, Mirko Noordegraaf, who has identified three categories of professionalism - *pure* (i.e. relating to the ‘classic’ professions), *hybrid* and *situated* professionalism - that reflect the reconfiguration of professional work (Noordegraaf, 2013, 2007) for applicability to the contemporary workplace, where, he points out (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 770) ‘boundaries are shifting . . . societal orders have turned from thick to thin, with more mobility, less stratification, and weakened collective frameworks’.

Indeed, reflecting acceptance that professionalism is now very much a contested concept, Gewirtz *et al* (2009, p. 3) argue for the ‘need to work with plural conceptions’ of it. Trying to reach consensus, then, on what professionalism means in today’s context is probably a hopeless pursuit. In the literature a range of views (Evetts, 2013; Freidson, 2001; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2009; Nixon, 2001; Noordegraaf, 2007, 2013; Ozga, 1995; Troman, 1996) represent professionalism variously as, *inter alia*: a form of occupational control; a socially constructed and dynamic entity; a mode of social co-ordination; the application of knowledge to specific cases; the use of knowledge as social capital; a normative values system that incorporates consideration of standards, ethics, and quality of service; the basis of the relationship between professionals and their clients or publics; a source of specific identity/ies; and a basis and determinant of social and professional status and power.

So, if – perhaps derived from your student days of yesteryear, when those of you attending colleges of education may have been introduced to the classic criteria for a profession - you harbour an impression that, from a scholarship perspective, what constitutes a profession is set in stone, you need to move on. Even more recent discourses and debates that engaged the educational research community in the 1990s – and that were related to issues such as loss of professional autonomy and what some commentators called ‘proletarianisation’, stemming from government-imposed policy changes to teaching and teachers’ working lives – are now considered passé (though I recall having to contend with the critical comments about a module I taught at Leeds from the then external examiner who, having been left behind in his own little time warp, failed to recognise as cutting edge research the material that I introduced to my students and wanted me to continue regurgitating debates that were long past their sell by dates!).

What exactly was or is this ‘cutting edge’ material? Well, it includes the work not only of Julia Evetts and Mirko Noordegraaf, cited above, but also of other critical analysts of professions and professionalism, such as Ron Barnett (best known for his writing on universities and the purposes of higher education), who has formulated the notion of ‘ecological professionalism’ (Barnett, 2011, p. 31) to depict the ‘networked complexity’ of 21st century working life. Barnett likens this context to thin ice upon which the ‘modern professional’ must skate, trying to keep ahead of its cracking behind her – an image that may resonate with many readers who find themselves constantly struggling to keep their heads above water (icy or hot!). And to these analyses I have added my own.

Re-conceptualising professionalism

Back in 2008, finding myself on board an aeroplane headed for Australia, where I had been invited to spend a week at the University of Ballarat, I recall racking my brains to think of ways in which I could add interest and originality to the keynote address I was about to deliver. This keynote – like the conference in which it featured - was going to be a little out of my comfort zone because my hosts were not educational researchers but occupational health and safety academics, who wanted me to speak on *Becoming a profession*, relating this statement to the health and safety practitioner workforce. (They had read my published adaptations of and extensions to Eric Hoyle’s models of ‘extended’ and ‘restricted’ professionals (Hoyle, 1975), and felt there might be something in it that could be applicable to their context.) Unfamiliar with the substantive field that was their main interest, I could not hope to wow my audience with my take on the latest issues in health and safety; I clearly had no idea what they were. So I knew that I would have to grab their attention by some other means, through my focus on professionalism - ensuring that I went beyond lack-lustre, run-of-the mill issues that risked sending them to sleep.

So it was there – 35,000 feet high – enjoying Malaysia Airlines’ lavish business class facilities that my hosts had kindly splashed out on, that, building on my writing and thinking over the preceding few years, I sketched out on a small notepad the first draft of what was to evolve into the current version of what I call my model of the componential structure of professionalism: my interpretation of what professionalism is and what it looks like. I present this below, as Figure 1.

With my head quite literally in the clouds, my starting point in formulating the model had been to jot down a list of all the aspects of people’s work that, to me, added up to what I choose to call their professionalism. When I address audiences on professionalism I still present them with that list, illustrated with colourful images embedded into my powerpoint:

- What practitioners do;
- How they do it;
- What they know and understand;
- Where and how they acquire their knowledge and understanding;
- What kinds of attitudes they hold;
- What codes of behaviour they adhere to;
- What purpose(s) they perform;
- What quality of service they provide;
- The level of consistency incorporated into the above.

To me, it is the combination of these aspects of their practice that constitutes people’s professionalism. The list above includes all the things that, to me, professionalism is. The model presented in pictorial form (Figure 1) essentially represents this list, although I have used neat, concise labels to convey each of what I call professionalism’s components or dimensions. (The vertically-sequenced arrangement of the dimensions in the model is necessitated by space restrictions and does not imply any hierarchical positioning.)

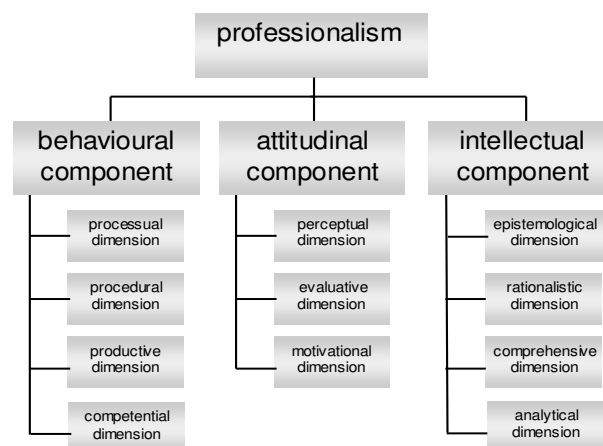


Figure 1: the componential structure of professionalism

What I label the *behavioural* component of professionalism relates to what practitioners physically do at work. I identify as its sub-components: the *processual*, *procedural*, *productive*, and *competential* dimensions of professionalism, which relate respectively to: processes that people apply to their work; procedures that they apply to their work; output, productivity and achievement (how much people ‘do’ and what they achieve); and their skills and competences. The *attitudinal* component of professionalism relates to attitudes held. I identify as its sub-components: the *perceptual*, *evaluative*, and *motivational* dimensions of professionalism, which relate respectively to: perceptions, beliefs and views held, (including those relating to oneself, hence, *self*-perception and identity); people’s values (not necessarily just grand values, like social justice and equality, but also values in the sense of what matters and is important to people – including what they like and dislike within the minutiae of their daily lives); and people’s motivation, job satisfaction and morale. The *intellectual* component of professionalism relates to practitioners’ knowledge and understanding and their knowledge structures. I identify as its sub-components: the *epistemological*, *rationalistic*, *comprehensive*, and *analytical* dimensions of professionalism, which relate respectively to: the bases of people’s knowledge; the nature and degree of reasoning that they apply to their practice; what they know and understand; and the nature and degree of their analyticism. (If the above whirlwind tour of my model is confusing, due to the economical explanation necessitated by my concern to keep within the preferred word limit for this article, more elucidation – including illustrative examples of how some of these dimensions are evidenced - may be found in Evans, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014.)

A very important point that I must emphasise, however, is that my interpretation of professionalism is not merit-laden. By this I mean that it does not relate to how *well* people are considered to do their work; it simply equates to each of the items on the list presented above, but in an entirely neutral way. Thus there is no such thing as *unprofessional* behaviour, within my conceptualisation; the term is redundant. Professionalism, as I see it,

relates to people's *being* in the context of their work; it is simply something that *is*, not something that *ought to be* – whether this is represented by practice that is praiseworthy or practice that is deplorable.

It is this aspect of my interpretation that confounds and unsettles some members of my audiences. I should, rather, say that it *confuses* them, for although I go to great pains to try to explain my conceptualisation of professionalism, often spelling it out step-by-step over the course of ten or fifteen minutes, I know there will always be at least one person who, unable to shake off her or his long-held, cherished notion that professionalism equates to the highest standards of occupational practice, rather than just any old practice – good, bad or indifferent – will, after apparently hanging intently on my every word, raise her or his hand at question time and ask, 'So what does *un*professional look like?' or – failing to grasp that the ideas I am trying to introduce are conceptual, rather than locked into practice – 'So, are you saying that there's no such thing as unprofessional behaviour?'

I shouldn't really become irritated or frustrated by such questions; the ideas that I present to them *are* difficult for many people to grasp. They struggle to appreciate that I am trying to separate out the conceptual (and theoretical) from the functional – from everyday practice. *Of course* I recognise that unacceptable practice in the workplace – practice that falls short of what customers or employers or managers would ideally want – occurs all too frequently. But what I am saying is that, wearing my academic hat, I do not label such practice unprofessional, because I hold different conceptions of professional and professionalism from those held by the woman or man in the street who hasn't made these topics the focus of her or his academic study. And whilst I might expect an audience of practitioners or of doctoral students or other early career researchers to struggle with the direction in which I am trying to stretch their minds, I do expect experienced academics and researchers to follow my drift – and, to be fair, most of them do.

Intertwine pathways: linking professionalism with professional development

What has professionalism got to do with professional development? To me – as I imply above – the two are inseparable. One of the many criticisms I make of research and scholarship into professional development or professional learning (see Evans 2014 for my explanation of what I see as the slight distinction between the two terms) is that researchers seldom clarify what precisely it is that they consider is being developed when referring to professional development. This is a conceptual weakness, for if researchers took the time and trouble to define professional development they would invariably find that this leads them to consideration of what it is that they believe is being – or expected or hoped to be – developed.

To me, it is people's *professionalism* that is the focus of development. This interpretation is implicit in my current stipulative umbrella definition: 'professional development is the process whereby people's *professionalism* may be considered to be enhanced, with a degree of permanence that exceeds transitoriness' (Evans, 2014, p. 188, emphasis added). Of course, this is just *my* interpretation – my 'take' – on professional development; I do not imply that it should be universally accepted; indeed, intelligent discussion and debate of such issues is to be welcomed, for it is likely to inject more analytical depth into scholarship than is evident in much published work. But the point I make here is that, since it is professionalism that I believe is being developed or intended or expected to be developed, then my conceptualisation of professional development is closely aligned with my conceptualisation of professionalism – the latter is the basis of the former. That conceptualisation (of professional development) is represented pictorially as a model in Figure 2, below.

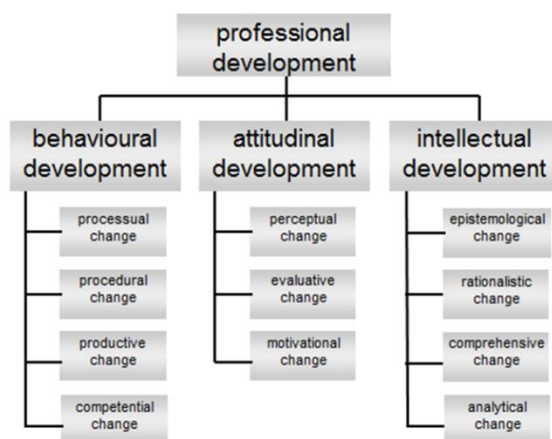


Figure 2: The componential structure of professional development

Sharp-eyed readers will have spotted that, although first impressions may have suggested a *déjà vue* experience, the model presented in Figure 2 does in fact differ from that in Figure 1 – but only in relation to the labels used: 'development' replaces 'component' and 'change' replaces 'dimension'. Other than those distinctions, the two models are the same as each other because it is precisely the same dimensions or components that are at play in each. In relation to professionalism, they represent its components; in relation to professional development, they represent the foci of change (for the better) that constitutes development.

As a field of study, professional development or professional learning has been well-researched, and in the last 2-3 decades the research community has made great strides in taking the field forward. As with professionalism, there is often a gap between the focus of and the understandings that underpin cutting edge research into professional development and understandings of it held by practitioners. Time was, professional development simply meant attending a course or workshop, or receiving some similar kind of training or work-based learning. Now conceptualised *much* more widely than this by the professional development research community, it is interpreted as including work-related learning or development that occurs unconsciously, without people's awareness of being developed. But practitioners seldom interpret it so widely – to them, it still means courses or workshops, or perhaps mentoring or coaching. The restricted thinking that underpins such narrow interpretation may be likened to dipping one's toe into the water, just enough to break its surface. Representing a much more expansive vision, cutting edge research in the field is the equivalent of diving headfirst and plunging down to explore the murky depths that lie far below the surface – and that are invisible from it!

And there remains much to explore and uncover. Researchers, too, have limited the depth to which they have been prepared to venture and have tended to focus on identifying the *contexts* and *conditions* that are conducive to professional development – whether these be courses, workshops, groups of peers working together, developmentalist-focused organisational cultures, or supportive leadership, or whatever. But there has been inadequate focus on and attention to *how* or *why* such conducive contexts work: what goes on in an individual's head to makes her or him accept a new idea or new way of doing something, that represents a professional development 'episode'. It is on this – what I call the micro-level professional development process in individuals – that I often find myself pondering, and that I have placed high up on my own personal research agenda (see Evans, 2014, for an outline of the progress I have made so far).

The story so far and what the next chapter should bring

I am conscious that I have presented a very concise and necessarily abbreviated taste of some of the research and scholarship-related issues to which I devote much of my time. I am not sure how much of my own thinking, and the models that represent it, non-specialists will have the inclination or the time to grasp. The ideas I have outlined are quite complex and difficult to follow even when I explain them as fully and comprehensively as possible, so to have whizzed through them at break-neck speed here may not have been the best way to win converts and influence people. I therefore offer a second tranche of supporting elucidation below.

Essentially, what I have tried to convey – or wish to add here - are the following key points, which sum up where and how the field of professionalism and professional development lies today:

- Professionalism is interpreted by leading researchers of it quite differently from how the term is used by the woman or man in the street, so if you are still clinging on to trait-based interpretations of it, or, by extension, perceive accountability and performativity as threats to it, you are, from a scholarship perspective, out of date.
- Amongst researchers, professionalism is a contested concept and no one has emerged as the clear 21st century guru on what it now means – that role is still up for grabs, and the discourse remains as fluid as the concept itself.
- I have added my two-penny-worth to this lively discourse, having formulated my own conceptualisation and definition (see Evans, 2011, 2014) of professionalism, which trifurcates it into behavioural, attitudinal and intellectual components – and identifies their dimensions.
- Professional development, as I see it, is very closely aligned with professionalism, since both concepts share precisely the same basic components and dimensions.
- Both professionalism and professional development are multi-dimensional, according to my interpretation – this means they are not simply and only about how people *behave*; they may each relate to any one or more of what I currently identify as 11 dimensions to how people do their jobs (including how they think, and what kinds of attitudes they hold).
- As with much educational research, both sub-fields (if we separate out professionalism and professional development) suffer from inadequate conceptualisation and definitional precision – in other words, far too few researchers clarify what they mean when they use these terms.
- Inadequate conceptualisation and definitional precision have serious methodological implications, since they pose threats to construct validity.

The last word

As a final word, I identify two main priorities for researchers of professionalism and professional development. The first must be to disseminate widely to practitioners – in language, and with explanations, that they, as non-researchers, will understand – that both society and the nature of working life have changed beyond recognition since the days when professionalism meant something that only a very few occupational groups could claim, and professional development was limited to something that is done deliberately to people, with their full knowledge and consent, rather than something that is part-and-parcel of day-to-day (working) life and that creeps up on people unawares and erodes away at their thinking and their attitudes. The second is to understand much better the invisible (and sometimes imperceptible) process whereby professional development, so interpreted, occurs in

individuals. This is what I call the singular unit of professional development (if such a thing exists). But unless we crack its code we cannot work out the secret of what makes for effective professional development - which means that we cannot be confident in any professional development-related policy or practice that we advocate. Surely, then, this should appear high on the research agenda for the field.

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