Chapter XXXII

Redefining Professional: The Case of India’s Call Centre Agents

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ABSTRACT

Scholars researching the area of the sociology of professions had earlier predicted that as occupations seek to improve their public image, professionalism would embrace all their incumbents. It is therefore no revelation that call centre agents in India identify themselves as professionals. Using van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenological approach, we explored this dimension with 59 call centre agents located in Mumbai and Bangalore, India. The findings demonstrate that neither the trait nor the power approaches drawn from the traditional literature on the sociology of professions explain call centre agents’ identification with professional work. Instead, agents’ experiences validate the contemporary explanation that emphasises the appeal of professionalism used by employer organisations as a means to convince, cajole, and persuade their employees to perform and behave in ways which the employer organisation deems appropriate, effective and efficient. It is in this context that agents accept stringent work systems and job design elements, techno-bureaucratic controls and the primacy of the customer in return for the privileges bestowed upon them by way of being professionals. While professional identity thus serves as a means of socio-ideological control facilitating the realisation of the organisation agenda, it is not all-encompassing as agents simultaneously show signs of resistance.
INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, Wilensky (1964) predicted that professionalism would eventually embrace everyone with some claim to specialised knowledge or practice. The basis for this observation was the rapid spread of the forms of professional organisation among occupational groups, which were not professions (Marshall, 1962). Even the most unlikely occupations were becoming candidates for professionalisation as a high degree of technical competence, sophistication, and complexity became increasingly characteristic of the vast majority of work activities (Pavalko, 1971). Others argued, that it was not technical competencies alone that was claimed but occupations also claimed professional status by announcing that they were trustworthy, had a code of ethics, a professional association, and performed important services which only they were qualified to do, and were therefore deserving of autonomy and prestige (Klegon, 1978; Crompton, 1990). Thus, virtually every occupation seeking to improve its public image claimed to be a “profession” (Friedson, 1970). The spread of this phenomenon had Larson (1977) ask why and how a set of work practices and relations that characterised medicine and law came to become a rallying call for a whole set of knowledge-based occupations in very different employment conditions. More recently, Evetts (2003) argues that the word “professional” is increasingly being used in all work contexts. Not surprisingly then, in India, it is commonplace to refer to call centre agents as professionals (See D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006; Ramesh, 2004). So entrenched is this perception in the Indian call centre industry that even trade unionists trying to organise call centre agents have named their organisation as UNITES Professionals (Union for Information Technology Enabled Services Professionals) or Young Professionals Collective. It would therefore be important at this stage to refer to the sociology of professions literature.

PROFESSIONS AND PROFESSIONALISM: UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENA

Traditionally, there have been two approaches in the sociology of professions: the trait or attribute approach and the power approach. Until the early 1970’s, the trait approach dominated the academic literature. Numerous efforts along functionalist lines (See, for example, Barber, 1963; Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Goode, 1969; Greenwood, 1962; Harris-Jenkins, 1970; Kornhauser, 1962; Marshall, 1962; Moore, 1970; Parsons, 1951; Wilensky, 1964) were devoted to isolating and listing attributes that served to distinguish professions from nonprofessional occupations. This school of thought believed that the sociological task was to list the characteristics of an ideal-typical profession against which actual examples of occupational groups could then be assessed as more or less professional (MacDonald, 1995). The trait model of professions included two core characteristics – a body of theoretical and technical knowledge and a service orientation. On the basis of these characteristics, the profession claimed and acquired other properties. This included professional autonomy which was the right accorded by society to members of a profession to determine the nature of problems with which they were concerned, the appropriate procedures by which these would be solved, and the evaluation of professional performance. In addition, the professions were characterised by control over recruitment and licensing of new members, a long period of training and socialisation, monopoly over the performance of certain tasks, authority recognised by clients and the public, a belief in the importance of their function, a sense of community, formal associations and a code of ethics (Latham, 2002; Leicht & Fennell, 2001; Toren, 1975).

However, by the early 1970’s, this functional orthodoxy was increasingly criticised and rejected.
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