Chapter 1

The Crisis in Professionalism and the Need for a Normative Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the crisis in professionalism from a historical and conceptual point of view. It describes the development of professional practices as part of the process of modernization (i.e., the rationalization of working processes and the increasing division and specialization of labor). This process was successful, but has also been accompanied by tendencies to bureaucracy, alienation, meaninglessness, and dehumanization. The chapter describes a set of desiderata for a conceptual framework that successfully avoids these pitfalls and sketches how a so-called normative practice approach could provide a conceptual and normative framework that enables professionals to disentangle and remedy the tensions and ambivalences within their professional practices.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the concept of professionalism. It gives an analysis of the crisis in professionalism and argues for a normative approach.1 It provides a conceptual framework to understand professionalism and analyses what is needed to solve critical issues in the current debate about professions. It describes how the development of professional practices should be understood as part of the process of modernization, i.e., the rationalization of working processes and the increasing
division and specialization of labor. Critical elements in this process are alienation of laborers from their labor; dehumanizing tendencies in the provision of services; and risk of a decline towards bureaucracy, anonymity and meaninglessness.

The chapter proceeds with a description of what is needed for a professionalism that is able to withstand these tendencies. It ends with a summary of the argument that will be developed in this and the next introductory chapters.

THE CRISIS OF PROFESSIONALISM

Professionalism

Most definitions of professionalism mention expert knowledge and skills as one of its core features, together with certain jurisdictions or privileges of the professional. These jurisdictions and privileges are granted by society and/or patients based on the professional’s commitment, accountability, and competence. Among these privileges (and their related requirements) are self-regulation with respect to standards of excellence, membership in the professional subgroup, training requirements, and criteria for licensing and quality control. Rueschemeyer describes the traditional (functionalist) conception of professionals as follows:

*Individually and, in association, collectively, the professions ‘strike a bargain with society’ in which they exchange competence and integrity against the trust of client and community, relative freedom from lay supervision and interference, protection against unqualified competition as well as substantial remuneration and higher social status. (Rueschemeyer, 1983, p. 41)*

He also emphasizes that the way we think about expert occupations transcends the confines of occupational sociology and comes close to a central theme in classical sociology: the emergence of modern society and culture as such.

*How expert knowledge is deployed in different institutional forms, how it is controlled, how it is used as a resource of power and a basis of privilege, and how in turn different institutional forms of deployment, social control as well as individual and collective advantage, are affected by other and wider social structures and processes—inquiries into these questions tell us much about the structure and the dynamics of society as a whole. (Rueschemeyer, 1983, p. 38)*

Moore gives a practical overview and defines the professional as having a full-time occupation, which sets his or her efforts apart from amateurism. The professional
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