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Professions and occupational identities

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Theory of professions and occupational identities

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The significance of professionals' information behavior has attracted increased attention during the last few decades in library and information science (LIS). Great effort has been put into exploring information needs, seeking and use by various occupational groups (e.g. Leckie, Pettigrew & Sylvain, 1996). This text aims to complement previous research by means of *theory of professions.*

Throughout the 20th century a tradition of theory of professions has been developed and used within the social sciences, primarily in sociology, but also in LIS. This development should be understood in the context of the increasing specialisation in working life combined with the acceleration of institutionalised expertise in society. Theory of professions focuses on the relations between occupational groups, theoretical knowledge and the possibilities for practitioners to exclusively apply such knowledge within their occupational practice. Applying such a perspective to the field of information behavior, demonstrates that the traditional focus at the two levels of individual and workplace is not always sufficient for a study of information behavior in occupational practices. Instead, workplaces and their concomitant occupational groups should also be related at a societal level. The workplace is a

meeting place, not just for practitioners and their clients, but also for competing professional interests, power relations, and occupational identities.

Until the 1970's theorists of professions held often a strong interest in comparing the traits of occupational groups in order to distinguish professions from other occupational groups (MacDonald, 1995). This direction has been characterized as *essentialistic* as it presupposes a certain essence within these professions. Some of the distinguishing traits are that professional practice should be conducted with a starting-point in systematic theory, that the intended occupational group is recognized as an authority within its domain, that society sanctions the enterprise in question, that the practitioners work in accordance with ethical codes and that the professional body controls its own training program. The essentialistic approach has been criticized, among other things, for its view of society as rationalistic and free from conflict, where professionals work altruistically without group interests, solely for the benefit of their clients and thereby for the best interest of society (MacDonald, 1995).

Since the 1970's, research on professions has taken a new focus, namely to study the professional aspirations among occupational groups, or in other words, their *professional project* (e.g. Larson, 1977). Defining professions in order to distinguish them from other occupational groups thereby becomes less significant. Instead, great interest has been directed towards studying the strategies used by different groups to achieve a certain social status as a "profession". The essentialistic traits have come to be regarded as ambitions held by less established professions, such as nurses, social workers and librarians, rather than manifestations of a professional core. Within such projects, considerable symbolic significance is attributed to the theoretical knowledge of the occupational groups in question (Collins, 1979). To consider the symbolic significance of knowledge, the users' relation to,

and interaction with, information – such as bibliographical databases, online professional communities and journal articles – often plays a major part (Sundin, in print).

In LIS, theory of professions has principally been used to explore changes in librarianship over time, the development of its knowledge system and its relation to other occupational groups (e.g. Harris, 1992; Hjørland, 2000; Tuominen, 1997; Winter, 1988; cf. Abbott, 1988). However, theory of professions has also been used in order to understand the information behavior of other professionals (Sundin, 2002, in print; Wilson, 1983). Olof Sundin explicitly applies the theory of professions within his research on nurses' information behavior, and thereby shows how the "relevance" of information and information "needs" are defined in competition between, or within, different professional knowledge domains. By combining interviews and document studies he demonstrates that nurses' professional information, as well as the significance of their information seeking and use, may be seen as part of their professional projects (Sundin, 2002, in print). One pertinent concept related to the theory of professions is that of *cognitive authority*, as developed by Patrick Wilson. In his use of this concept Wilson proposes that both the status assigned to information as well the kind of professional solutions that are considered socially appropriate, are negotiated by experts in different professional domains (Wilson, 1983). Wilson expresses this in the following way: "What one needs to know also depends in part on what others expect one to know" (Wilson, 1983: p. 150).

In the brief overview presented above the role of norms, values and expectations connected to professionals' information needs, seeking and use has been emphasized. In recent research a promising direction of theory of professions stresses the importance of how the use of a *discourse of professionalism* affects individual occupational practitioners (Evetts, 2003;

Fournier, 1999). Such processes may be analyzed in accordance with the concept of *occupational identity.* As a practitioner of an occupation, the individual relates to an identity on a collective level, which, to a varying degree, affects the individual's physical and discursive actions. The professional discourse, formed out of prevailing interests, thereby exerts a disciplinary logic that influences individual practitioners' information needs, seeking and use by mediating a suitable collective occupational identity.

During training for a profession, students not only learn to master a set of intellectual and practical skills; they also become part of a community with specific norms, values and expectations concerning personal conduct. Different approaches to information behavior may therefore be seen as expressions of occupational identities. Consequently, it is here proposed that the concept of *information needs* should be complemented with the concept of *information interests.* Thereby it is stressed that information behavior should not merely be regarded as expressions of individuals' subjective demands; it is also, in part, something that is negotiated on a social arena. Occupational identities are, from this point of view, not conceived as stable essences within individuals. Rather, they serve as arenas for a diversity of, sometimes conflicting, approaches to one single phenomenon (McCarthy, 1996).

Theory of professions, together with the concepts of *cognitive authority*, *occupational identity* and *information interest,* contributes to a deeper understanding of issues concerning how practitioners' information behavior is formed, maintained and mediated in society. As this theory has been criticized for its lack of applicability on the micro level, research issues studied from this perspective benefit from being complemented with ethnographically oriented studies that include consequences of professional projects for individuals and their

actions. In this way, different levels of analysis may be included and interrelated, which makes for a more profound understanding of the information seeking of professionals.

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