



Professionals

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Professions are institutionalised bodies of specialised knowledge and practice around which divisions of labour within contemporary societies are organised. As well as performing a collective function, membership within a profession offers individuals upward social mobility and meritocratic recognition. Professional expertise is so ubiquitous in societies around the world that we tend not to ask how and why specialised occupational groups have emerged, how they produce, control, and apply their knowledge, and how the meanings of professionalism differ from one context to the next. Anthropologists' early focus on colonial settings attuned them to view professionals as instruments of political power and control, particularly in biomedical contexts. Subsequent studies have produced a diverse array of interpretations, seeing professionalism as a performative or aesthetic practice that sits apart from the messy realities of work, as a marker of prestige and class mobility, and as a site of ethical engagement and debate. Recent approaches tend to focus on the ways in which professional identity is made through everyday practice and the struggles entailed in maintaining it, rather than viewing it as a label conferred automatically on the basis of training. Finally, the study of professionals has prompted renewed attention to anthropologists' own claims to professionalism, and the social networks, institutions, and epistemic assumptions needed to sustain it.

Introduction

In a conversation between Scottish physician David Livingstone and a Tswana ritual expert in 1857, the mission doctor attempted to disprove the rainmaker's arguments about his influence on rain. Livingstone drew on European models of empirical reason, referring to himself as the 'medical doctor' and to the rainmaker as 'rain doctor'. He implied ironically that their contest of ideas was being fought on equal [ontological](#) terms (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 211). Thereby, Livingstone also suggested something about the way in which an incipient ideology of professionalism served as a marker of expert knowledge and authority in this [colonial](#) setting of southern Africa.

This interaction took place during a period in which the professionalisation of spheres of expertise such as medicine and law was occurring alongside the acceleration of industrial capitalism and technological development in the nineteenth century. It was aided by various institutional forms such as associations, systems of accreditation, and ethics codes, which demarcated the formal parameters of professional knowledge and served as barriers to entry. As such, professionalisation was an exclusionary process of formalising and limiting claims to expert knowledge. It standardised expertise in ways that made it quickly transportable around the world. For instance, from the late-nineteenth century, the professionalisation of medicine rendered population health amenable to state intervention. Professionalism emerged as a new form of governance, intertwined with state projects at home and in the colonies.

The study of professionalism, tied to the emergence of modern state [bureaucracies](#), traditionally fell under the remit of sociology rather than anthropology. Key figures studying it include the sociologists Talcott Parsons and Everett Hughes, influenced by the foundational works of social theorists Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Both Weber and Durkheim witnessed the emergence of occupational groups in Europe's transforming societies.¹⁴ Durkheim had asserted early on that professionals were custodians of [morality](#) and collective interest. Professional ethics provided solidarity in an industrial society that risked moral dissolution under the sway of free market philosophy (1992). Weber focused less on professionals and more on bureaucracies, maintaining that power in society becomes legitimised and regulated by rational and depersonalised bureaucratic systems that impose rules on human behaviour.

Writing in the 1930s during a period in which society risked collapsing into fascism, Talcott Parsons, was fascinated with the question of how society's fragile stability was maintained. He held that professions did maintain stability but differed from bureaucracies because they emphasised collegial and individualist [values](#) rather than hierarchies. Yet both bureaucracies and professions shared important commonalities: they demarcated specific, restricted functions in the [workplace](#) and they formalised standards of practice, making people's roles distinct from their personalities and individual circumstances. For Parsons, professionals—like bureaucrats—were essential components of 'modern' industrial society, harbingers of rational principles holding society together through the creation of shared values and goals. Concepts of 'mandate' and 'license' were later developed and deemed necessary for professions to exist, as they formalised relationships of trust within society (Hughes 2009). As well as entrusting some of its necessary functions to these contained spheres of expertise, society could offload onto the professions responsibility for its more disturbing elements. For instance, disease would be dealt with by medical professionals and crime by lawyers (Dingwall 2008: 4-5).

By the 1970s, the idea that professionals served as a kind of 'glue' for social cohesion gave way increasingly to a view of professionalism as a mechanism of control and elitism. This position was exemplified in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who viewed professionalism as a source of power, or what he called 'social capital', that could be used to gain political and social status (Bourdieu 1990).

Given anthropology's original focus on so-called 'traditional' societies, Parsons' contemporaries in anthropology limited their interest in expertise to a focus on 'ritual experts', such as the rainmaker in Livingstone's account. But as anthropologists turned their attention to colonial actors and to the bureaucratic workings of the state, they began to focus on professional expertise itself. Today there exists no distinct subsection of anthropology devoted to the study of professionals. Instead, work on professionalism is disparately nestled in a number of different areas, including the anthropology of expertise, [science](#), and technology studies and the study of states, bureaucracies, and corporate settings.

This entry therefore draws together some key strands from different sub-fields of the discipline. They include considering professionals as [agents](#) of social control, status, and class mobility, as well as a more recent focus on professionalism as an ethical and aspirational project.

Professionals as agents of social control

Anthropology's early encounter with professionals, aside from within the academe itself, began in colonial settings. The study of [colonialism](#) highlighted early on that professionals are not just the benign experts they often see themselves as, but that they are also social actors embedded within colonial and other power [relations](#). The aforementioned conversation between Livingstone and the rainmaker is a good example of this. In addition to the more overt forms of conversion, it was through assertions of professionalised expertise that the Tswana were drawn subtly and inexorably into the hegemonic structures of colonising culture (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). Professional knowledge, religious authority, and colonial power converged to produce new regimes of domination. Medical missionaries and military doctors throughout the European colonies set out not only to ameliorate ill-health—often brought about or exacerbated by brutal [labour](#) regimes—but to 'civilise' colonised populations.

While medicine was a key locus of professional expertise in colonial settings, it was not the only one. In Northern Rhodesia (today's Zambia) in the early twentieth century, colonial administrators were concerned about feeding a growing population; in particular, how to sustain rural populations while extracting the labour of male migrants who travelled for work to the [mines](#). Worried about constraints on the self-sufficiency of [ethnic](#) groups such as the Bemba, they drew on the expertise of [scientists](#) who determined that the widely practiced agricultural method—a semi-nomadic, slash and burn system known as *citimene*—was wasteful (Richards 1995 [1939]). A study by an anthropologist and a [historian](#) fifty years later revealed that a series of highly adaptive and varied aspects of *citimene* had been overlooked by colonial officials, tasked with the job of defining and controlling such practices (Moore & Vaughan 1994). Professional expertise in this instance reproduced narratives compatible with political agendas. The authors revealed, moreover, that the colonial preoccupation with *citimene* was not only to do with food supply but with how to control populations and to create permanent residences in order to implement [taxation](#). However, the study is careful not to arrive at a singular conclusion, showing that while professional knowledge could not be taken at face value, neither could it be dismissed as mere colonial representation.

The work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault equipped anthropologists with a language to understand professionals as instruments of political power. Foucault was particularly influential in studies of medical settings. In *The birth of the clinic*, published in 1963, he argued that biomedical knowledge, formalised through systems of professionalism, rendered patients' bodies passive objects of control and intervention (Foucault 2002 [1963]). His approach made it possible to describe how a 'medical gaze'

became embroiled in systems of [racialised](#) exploitation. One [ethnographic](#) history of a mission hospital in the Belgian Congo shows that medical missionaries became ‘colonial agents of a form of indirect rule’ (Hunt 1999: 165). Nancy Rose Hunt describes the medicalisation of childbirth, in a context where concerns of colonial administrators about a falling birth rate motivated medical attention to safe childbearing. Locally trained midwives became valued professionals and important culture brokers, ‘inviting, persuading and compelling’ women to attend a clinic, despite growing fears prompted by caesarean [deaths](#) (Hunt 1999: 230-1). Notwithstanding their suspicions, local women also brought themselves to hospital during difficult births and appropriated colonial items such as soap and birth certificates to suit their needs. Colonial powers often viewed this process as a ‘civilising’ practice, using doctors in rural hospitals to implement hygiene and other state directives in what the author describes as a project of ‘medical, bodily and demographic control’ (Hunt 1999: 6). Yet through detailed descriptions of professionals such as the midwife Malia Winnie, Hunt resists straightforward arguments about colonial intrusion and local reaction. The experts in this setting – teachers, nursing men and midwives – were ‘colonial middle figures’, engaged in a process not just of control, but of cultural mediation and negotiation, such as between local and medical meanings of bodily incision. Professional practice was one of translation, ‘a necessary condition of colonial life’ (Hunt 1999: 13).

In contemporary hospital settings, ethnographic studies show how ‘professional logics’ exert control over patients. In the United Kingdom, for instance, enactments of professional identity can construct asymmetrical power relations in which patients become subordinate. ‘Professional logics’ place demands on patients, who must display ‘due deference’ to medical staff and their expertise as a prerequisite for accessing [care](#) (White *et al.* 2012: 78). Take the example of a distressed elderly woman who arrives in a UK Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department with a bleeding nose caused by a fall. An on-looking doctor remarks that ‘many people here have nothing wrong with them’ (White *et al.* 2012: 72). Since the doctor perceives the woman’s condition as too minor to require his clinical expertise, the patient is deemed undeserving of care and rendered a ‘problem’. Professional knowledge demarcates patients as either legitimate or unworthy, impeding ‘the recognition of patients as persons’ (White *et al.* 2012: 72).

Ethnographic attention to professional practice suggests the ways in which professional hierarchies may [reproduce](#) the kinds of ‘indifference’ (Herzfeld 1993) that have long been associated with [bureaucracies](#). Professions are embedded within, and may help to reproduce, power relations prevalent in society.

Performance and aesthetics of professionalism

A key feature that unites studies of professionals is the attention to the [work](#) process itself. It reveals that activities involved in performing and hence maintaining one’s professional status may be quite distinct from other aspects of professional work.

In a volume on international development professionals, David Mosse describes their tendency to move towards agreement and coherence, and focuses on the political effects of such convergences. Professionals must navigate the messiness, complexities, and disagreements entailed in their everyday practice while maintaining the appearance of coherence upon which their professional identities rely. In his research about an international development intervention in India, Mosse encountered ‘a professional habitus that automatically transferred the actuality of events into the preconceived categories of legitimate meaning and ideal process’ (Mosse 2011a: 22). By reproducing models and templates, engaging in ‘group think’ (Woods 2007), or forming closed networks built around certain norms of social interaction (Eyben 2011), they can create an appearance of efficiency and disguise the complex problems encountered in daily work.

Documents are a key technology through which the official narratives of professionals are produced (Riles 2006). However, the ways that documents are used vary depending on professional cultures. In certain contexts, their creation may have as much to do with building consensus and reproducing convergence, as with the stated purpose or content of documents (Green 2011; Hull 2012). Yet, the uses of paperwork change in contexts where professionals operate with relative impunity, as work on the Nigerian *gendarmerie* suggests (Göpfert 2013). *Gendarmes* are military police operating in rural areas, responsible primarily for traffic control, public order, and criminal investigations. They closely associate their professional status with their training in writing, a skill which they perceive distinguishes them from the police and military. In criminal investigations, *gendarmes* produce a *procès-verbal*, a document containing information about events, observations, and evidence pertaining to a crime, to be transferred to a public prosecutor. In the absence of scrutiny by seniors regarding the accuracy of the reports, *gendarmes* produce documents that are ‘aesthetically satisfying’ and through which they express their individual identities and statuses. While adhering to the required template, they alter font, type size, spacing, and use of symbols in the place of certain letters to personalise the appearance of the document. Verbose or technical language signifies professional status. It entails translating a witness’s words in a way that prioritises the ‘dramaturgy’ of the document over the accuracy of its claims (Göpfert 2013: 330). Crucially, *gendarmes* operate in an environment in which professional worth is achieved through the appearance of documents, while processes ensuring the reliability of content are absent. To be a professional in this context is to perform one’s individualism and intellect through presentation and writing style.

The performance of professional status is similarly important among international development professionals, albeit taking a different form (Eyben 2011). Travelling abroad for work, development professionals are physically and socially distant from the communities they are sent to assist (Eyben 2011: 145). Instead, they encounter host countries through enclosed, elite spaces of expatriate sociality, forming friendships with one another at picnics, [sporting](#) events, and parties. It is in these spaces that meanings of

professionalism are made, because socialising brings a donor community into being, a necessary step towards policy coherence. However, because these ways of socialising do not include ‘getting to know the country and its people’, these activities reproduce the gap between policy agendas and grounded realities, a well-known problem in development practice (Eyben 2011: 141). In these examples, the performance of professionalism—whether in documents or in social gatherings—is more important than the specificities of official roles that people might play.

A discourse of professionalism also provides a language for disciplining people's physical appearance at work, especially of women. In a data-entry firm in Barbados, women are expected to perform ‘professionalism’, defined by their seniors in terms of their appearance and comportment (Freeman 1993). Yet women were explicit in describing their jobs as a far cry from their understanding of ‘professional’, remarking that jobs in agricultural and domestic labour were better paid than theirs. Contradictions emerged since some women said they preferred these jobs because they liked to work in a ‘professional enterprise’. They thereby acknowledged the higher status it conferred to them, all the while recognising its façade-like quality. Here, professional identity turns out to be ambivalent, as both a source of social value and an empty signifier.

Despite their claims to meritocratic values, professions may be as likely as other kinds of [labour](#) practices to mobilise differences such as gender, [ethnicity](#), religion, nationality, or [citizenship](#) status. This applies even to sectors we tend to think of as the most formally rational and calculative, such as [finance](#). In London’s banking sector, a cohort of culturally working class ‘barrow boys’—defined as ‘streetwise dealers from East and South London’—dominated the trading floor, where conspicuous consumption and homophobic jokes signified status and belonging at work (Zaloom 2006: 77). This changed dramatically when managers diversified their staff and began to recruit graduates—especially women and ethnic minorities—whose diverse, individual approaches, it was felt, could be harnessed for greater economic success. Managers viewed this as a process of ‘professionalisation’, suggesting that meanings of professionalism are derived at least partly from performances of class and social status.

The idea of professionalism as a performance is captured by economic anthropologist David Graeber’s provocative claim that large numbers of professional, middle-management and administrative roles are ‘bullshit jobs’; that is, jobs lacking any meaningful contribution to society and existing ‘just for the sake of keeping us all working’ (Graeber 2018). These jobs include those located in industries such as financial services, telemarketing, corporate law, public sector administration, human resources, and public relations—as well as the various roles that exist to support these industries. There is a performative quality to the jobs since, Graeber suggests, those who occupy them would readily admit that their roles lack meaningful social purpose. However, this point of view may overlook the ways that such roles, even if failing to contribute to loftier projects of the public good, may meaningfully signify personal, aspirational goals, especially in places where upward mobility is by no means assured. This brings us to the next theme

of professionalism: as a route to upward mobility.

Status, aspiration and class mobility

As well as focusing on cultures of [work](#) itself, anthropologists studying professionals have also shed light on class mobility and aspiration. They followed professionals not only in their official roles at work but also in their lives beyond the workplace, as family and community members and as [citizens](#). They have sought to understand the role of professional identity within wider life projects shaped by lifestyle aspirations and class trajectories. Witnessing the burgeoning [bureaucracies](#) and professional networks emerging in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, Weber recognised the importance of education and occupation as features of one's 'life chances'. New cultures of professionalism and white-collar employment were coming into being in ways that oriented scholars towards a focus on a growing yet differentiated middle class.

In India, professional employment in the government sector was formerly viewed as the hallmark of what it meant to be middle-class. Yet new cultures of consumerism have made middle-class lifestyles more widely accessible (Donner & De Neve 2011). Anthropologists turned their attention from workplace identity to cultures of consumption in trying to understand this so-called 'new' middle class. This shift partly reflected that labour casualisation and the decline of secure employment made it harder and harder for people to build their identities around their workplace. Instead, consumerist ideologies emerged that offered alternative forms of inclusion as well as opening up new lines of exclusion (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000). These insecurities also meant that middle-class lifestyles were increasingly [precarious](#) and were often funded by risky borrowing (James 2015). From these studies, it emerges that a focus on consumption practices is insufficient for understanding middle-class experiences. Instead, it may be necessary to look at the intersections between [values](#) created at work and the ways that status and aspiration are formed beyond it.

While consumption is a marker of class status, forms of belonging created by professional identities equally persist. In India, a rapidly expanding information technology (IT) industry has created demand for highly skilled jobs. This is accompanied by a growing disdain among young, educated people towards public-sector employment, which they associate with low salaries and the draconian hierarchies of an earlier era (Fuller & Narasimhan 2007: 142). Reflecting on what this shift means for people's identification with ideas of Indian nationhood, C.J. Fuller & Haripriya Narasimhan draw on research with IT professionals in Chennai to repudiate assumptions that globalisation leads people to abandon a commitment to the Indian nation. While many of these young professionals seek to gain 'exposure' by working overseas, they aspire to settle and build their lives back in India, assured of a highly paid job in the sector. This optimism orientates people towards new ideas of nationhood that depart from earlier ideas associated with Nehruvian nationalism (cf. Saxenian 2016).

Elsewhere in India, professional work is less secure. In a remote, rural region of Uttarakhand, government programmes are increasingly delivered through the quasi-independent institutions of government-funded NGOs (Bear & Mathur 2015). These organisations are populated by ‘young professionals’, a term borrowed from international development jargon. They are university-trained engineers and computer programmers holding short-term contracts. While their salaries were on a par with those who held permanent state employment, their temporary status and lack of housing or health insurance made their positions more insecure than their government-employed counterparts. Nonetheless, many were relieved to have found employment at all, and hoped that it would pave the way to a job in the city, a gateway to the middle-class milieu they wished to participate in. They did not hold ‘government jobs’ and actively dissociated themselves from what they saw as an anachronistic workplace order of draconian hierarchies and deferent submission embraced by their permanently-employed colleagues. This represented a distancing from the state because of their insecure contractual positions and because of the appeal of the growing private-sector industries of the kind described by Fuller and Narasimhan. In Ghana, too, professional qualifications do not necessarily lead to economic fulfilment or middle-class status. Yet professionals in Accra’s media and knowledge economy nonetheless view themselves as bearers of ‘respectable nationhood’ (Kauppinen 2017: 270).

The meanings of professionalism are influenced by wider social and political shifts. In China, new values of professional autonomy came about as market-based practices of labour allocation began to emerge in the 1990s (Hoffman 2010). Formerly, the government allocated jobs to graduates according to a system known as ‘iron rice bowl’, leaving them with no choice about which job they would do or where they would live. In a new market-based system, emphasis is placed on individual choice, which is nurtured through events such as graduate job fairs. Yet the government continues to influence this process, through managing and funding some of the recruitment events and through an on-going ‘moral education’ of university students and graduates. New market practices encouraging choice and personal responsibility combine with earlier socialist ideas about service to the nation to produce a ‘patriotic professionalism’ among these young adults (Hoffman 2010). Despite the choices that people now have, the previous security provided by the state as part of the ‘iron rice bowl’ has given way to a more precarious set of circumstances with less secure pensions and poor access to health care (Hoffman 2010; Hsu *et al.* 2007: 3). Since the collapse of Chinese [socialism](#) amounted to a process of de-institutionalisation, understanding its aftermath requires studying the ways that institutions are being constructed (Hsu *et al.* 2007: 3). Hence, professional practice becomes an important site for understanding contemporary China.

Anthropologists have reflected on a number of other ways that people articulate ideas of belonging through their professional identities. For young urbanites in Nairobi, Rachel Spronk shows, professionalism offers a source of identity that allows them to bypass [ethnic](#) differences which they have come to view as divisive (Spronk 2012). Similar observations are made about civil servants in Ghana (Lentz 2014) and

nurses in South Africa (Hull 2017).

Migration offers many professionals a route to new forms of prestige. But as professional expectations are formed in one context, working overseas can produce a jarring reassessment of one's own credentials. Czech nurses felt their self-worth as professionals undermined when they discovered themselves ill-equipped to perform the strict workplace protocols they encountered in hospitals in the UK and Saudi Arabia (Bludau 2014). When they returned to the Czech Republic, some were frustrated by the absence of such protocols and were motivated to initiate change as a way to sustain the professional identity they had come to associate with overseas practices. Consequently, we can understand professionalism to be 'rooted in one's personal history and built on through professional *and* personal experiences' (Bludau 2014: 877, *italics in original*). Migration offers a particularly useful lens for exploring this issue.

Professional status can also offer an alternative workplace [ethic](#) to 'clientelism'. Among civil servants in Ghana, for example, professionalism is associated with the 'state' and with a universalist ethos of service to the nation. In contrast, patronage is associated with 'government', and was practiced 'unofficially' and less readily spoken about (Lentz 2014). Here, professionalism offers a language of political neutrality that is part of workplace ethos. Thus, we may need to investigate further how patrimonial practices frequently associated with [post-colonial](#) government dovetail with workplace configurations. Notions of professionalism promise to be important pieces of this puzzle.

Professional ethics and care

Viewing professionalism as a site of governmentality, a performance, or a route to prestige risks overlooking [ethical](#) projects at work. Recent anthropological debates have highlighted that [bureaucracies](#) do not only [reproduce](#) indifference, governmentality, or structural violence but are also sites in which ideas about the 'public good' come to be debated, contested, and developed (Bear & Mathur 2015). Bureaucracies are 'an expression of a social contract between citizens and officials that aim to generate a utopian order' (Bear & Mathur 2015: 18). A focus on professional [values](#) and practices offers a mode for investigating the ways that such ethical practices come into being.

As my own study of nurses in a rural government hospital in South Africa shows, a professional ethic can be located in a long [history](#) of mission medicine as well as in more recent forms of public sector management and post-apartheid ideas of [citizenship](#) (Hull 2017). [Work](#) and citizenship are in South Africa indelibly linked in the post-liberation period. If apartheid was to be understood partly as a system of [racialised](#) exclusion from the workplace, especially from professional work, then to be fully a citizen was to become synonymous with salaried employment as an entitlement and a signifier of national identity. Yet far from being an automatic entitlement, the identity of 'professional' can be [precarious](#), especially for an occupation that has struggled historically to legitimise its status vis-à-vis the male-dominated world of

medicine. Nurses struggle with the dilemma of how to [care](#) in a situation where ideas of public accountability are reduced to narrow techniques such as audit. In this setting, nurses build their identities as professionals in relation to memories of mission medicine, contemporary religious practice, and ideas of 'calling', as they negotiate and reimagine their role as carers. Professional identities have as much to do with the 'relational, affective, and ritualistic' dimensions of work, and the meanings of care that they produce, as with the disciplining practices more frequently associated with management professionals (Brown 2016: 592). Approaching public administration through the lens of ideologies and ethics of professionalism focuses attention on the ethics of care that are entailed.

In many of these studies, well-documented themes in the sociological literature reappear, such as the tension between collective values and individual reputation. For foreign news correspondents, professional legitimacy is less about official accreditation and more to do with in-house socialisation in which one absorbs organisational culture and builds one's individual reputation through 'face-to-face acquaintance' (Hannerz 2004: 81). In a social-media dominated world increasingly oriented towards a work ethos of 'self-as-business', the imperative to engage in personal branding characterises many white collar fields (Gershon 2017). Such tensions have long featured as part of the search for professional identity, rather than being singularly located in the turn to neo-liberalism. Nonetheless their intensification during a period of privatisation and outsourcing raises interesting questions about the shifting parameters of professional legitimacy, autonomy, and ethics. So too do tendencies towards de-professionalisation, as more sophisticated technologies reduce the human skills required in certain fields. Challenges to professionalism have also been launched by professionals themselves: for instance, as development workers attempt to locate expertise in the realm of 'local knowledge'; or new forms of participative, citizen engagement work to subvert the hierarchies that produce taken-for-granted expertise (Mosse 2019).

The study of professionals may lead anthropologists to turn a critical eye on themselves. It can be difficult if not impossible to carry out [ethnographic](#) research among professionals, since anthropologists often discover that their interlocutors refuse to be objectified according to the knowledge regimes of a different field of expertise (Boyer 2008: 39-40). Anthropologists might be most effective through a collaborative approach with their interlocutors and by becoming attuned to the scepticism and reflexivity that professionals harbour about their own practice. Attempts to achieve these aims in practice often encounter obstacles. Reflecting on his experiences of researching an international development intervention in India, David Mosse described the objections that professionals raised to his claims about the successes and failures of the project. They made official complaints, fearing their professional reputations were being compromised by his research findings (Mosse 2011b: 21). For Mosse, this tension had to do with the need for professionals to deny or suppress complexity as a core feature of sustaining professional identity and legitimacy. In their complaints, the concept of professionalism was drawn upon explicitly as a basis for denying that such informal practices existed. Mosse argues that professionals were 'professionally

committed to their denial' (2011b: 21). This problem returns us to a central epistemological challenge for the anthropological study of professionalism, as outlined by Dominic Boyer: 'How can I [the anthropologist] document another expert culture without precisely re-framing their expert knowledge in the analytical categories of my own, thus absorbing them into my jurisdiction?' (Boyer 2008: 41). In order to reach a collaborative approach, anthropologists may have to recognise the contingencies of their ways of knowing and accept a kind of epistemic parity with the theoretical and technical frameworks of other professional fields.

Conclusion

A profession is generally understood as a standardised body of knowledge and practice situated within organisational or institutional contexts. Its authority is widely recognised, popularly mandated, and relies on state-sanctioned systems of training and accreditation. Yet as we scratch below the surface of formal definitions, it is evident that rather than denoting a fixed meaning, the category of 'professional' is produced and [reproduced](#) through messy organisational practices and socially embedded systems of knowledge production and power dynamics. Rather than being a label conferred automatically on the basis of formal accreditation, the term 'professional' is always in the making. Moreover, the work entailed in producing an appearance of coherent, successful professionalism can often sit apart from the 'real' [work](#) of professionals from day to day. Professionalism may best be understood, therefore, as 'process rather than product' (Mosse 2011a: 3). Running through the study of professionals is a core tension: are professionals seeking private advancement, perhaps even at the expense of those who rely on them, or are they committed to collective, [ethical](#) endeavours? The question is partly the legacy of early sociological understandings of society as a moral project existing in tension with private pursuits. It becomes more nuanced as we turn attention to the lived experiences of professionals, who strive to build satisfying working lives while navigating expectations of all sorts in their families, communities, and workplaces.

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[1] A detailed discussion of the sociology of professionalism is provided by Robert Dingwall (2008).