

**PROFESSIONAL VALUES AND GROUP SOCIALIZATION
THE HIDDEN VIRTUES OF A FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH**

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Abstract

Any attempt to approach professional socialization involves taking into consideration the role of socio-economic structures, but also the implicit cultural aspects such as beliefs, community value systems and attitude towards work, or the ongoing traditions of the primary groups. The relationship, with maximum explanatory capacity, established between socializing institutions and socialized individuals, can be conceived, interpreted, and eventually described in alternative terms. From a functionalist point of view, it can be said that professional socialization consists in a more or less effective internalization of an occupational culture. As part of this culture, professional values contribute, together with traditions and norms, to the effective perpetuation of socially expectations and practices related to the professional role. Functionalism envisions culture as a socially external reality that exerts a constant pressure on the group life of a relatively passive social actor that is culturally receptive, and who acts predominantly voluntarily. On the other hand, from an interactionist perspective, socialized individuals are influenced, and in turn actively influence the social context by making it their own. As a result, professional roles are permanently constructed and reconstructed. I will show that, although it does not take into account the possibility of value conflict at individual level, a problem that can seriously affect the actual success of professional socialization, the functionalist paradigm satisfactorily explains the socio-cultural variation of value orientations at occupational group level.

Keywords: professional values, group socialization, functionalism, group theory;

Introduction

The very notion of professional socialization involves references to certain socio-economic structures, to organizational processes, to labor markets, but also to culture related aspects such as value systems, group traditions and common beliefs. At individual level, professional socialization consists in a more or less effective internalization of an occupational

group culture. The process leads to the acquisition of knowledge and to the development of necessary practical skills, but it also involves the internalization of specific values and expectations corresponding to the professional role. Starting with early socialization stages, it continues with formal education and professional training, its final result being the professionalization of socialized individuals (Weidman, Twale, & Leahy Stein, 2001).

The process of professional socialization can be interpreted inside a symbolic interactionist, constructivist or functionalist framework, depending on the manner in which the relationship between social structure as socializing instance and the individual is conceptualized. I want to show that, from a cultural perspective, the transmission and formation of value orientations as an integral part of professional socialization processes can be satisfactorily explained within a functionalist frame of thought.

Having said this, I will briefly comment on Hinshaw's (1977) stadial model of professional socialization because, having structural variables in mind, manages to capture the formation of values within the dynamics of the relationship between professional role expectations and developing occupational identities.

Pre-professional socialization is linked to the formative experiences of childhood that continues to be relevant both before and after the period of formal education. In given macrosocial conditions, professional values are assimilated along a succession of identity crises that lead to the formation of professional role representations. So, at individual level, career interpretation cannot be explained without taking into account the influence of structural variables such as class and socio-economic status.

The professional socialization of individuals begins before and continues long after the phase of formal education in institutional settings when, both attitudes and professional values are socialized as an integral part of occupational knowledge. Macrosocial variables such as educational policies remain relevant for the formation of professional values.

The last stage covers the entire professional evolution, beginning with volunteering, and can be described as a continuous process of socialization - resocialization, due to the fact that individuals are always socialized according to the various social contexts in which they are expected to effectively manifest their professional identities.

1. Values: a structural-functionalist view

I have chosen to approach the notion of professional value from a structural-functionalist perspective, starting from the premise that an inclusive relationship establishes itself between the concept of socialization and that of professional socialization. Having this in mind, let us remember that, in the most comprehensive sense possible, values are defined as shared conceptions of what is socially desirable (Rokeach, 1979, & Hofstede, 1984). That is why an extremely brief review of the theoretical foundations of structural-functionalism becomes necessary at this point.

Starting from the empirical finding of the existence of a more or less fragile social order, functionalism claims that society as a whole endures due to the ability to perpetuate its own structures relatively efficiently. The social order is possible because some form of social contract protects individuals from each by maintaining the social *status-quo*. But, although the social system successfully maintains its balance within an equation that relates stability versus instability, this equation cannot have a final solution. Consequently, the order of the macro-social system remains inherently fragile. Having this in mind, individual socialization can only appear as a social control mechanism through which values and norms are transferred "from top to bottom. Individuals accept the norms and follow the values primarily to ensure and maintain their own safety, and the effect, that propagates "from the bottom up" at the macrosocial level, is social stability. The individual's compliance with social establishment is also due to agreeing with a given set of common values, intensely socialized from an early age, in order to ensure those habits that are absolutely necessary to participate in social life. There are three points to make.

First of all, the common nature of these values is based on the consensual meaning that functionalist thinking gives to that notion. That being said, at individual level we can only speak of a relative consensus with society's values because, as Parsons (1954) repeatedly states with remarkable epistemological obstinacy, although it takes place throughout an individual's life, the process of socialization is incomplete. That is why the establishment of norms and values is effective enough for the social order to perpetuate itself and the social system to function, but their socialization always remains imperfect.

Secondly, values vary according to social ordering processes (Kluckhohn, 1951) and their variation is culturally determined by the macrosocial structure. Social subsystems have their own

sets of values that are distinct versions of the general value system, however, the values do not lose their common character. Consequently, professional groups may have distinct values but share the general values of the society they belong to.

Thirdly, as aspects of culture, values are understood through the lens of group theory. Through socialization, individuals share common values because they come to belong to groups. Culture acts on the individual exerting continuous pressure on his group life while actively structuring social relations. Value orientations are constantly incorporated into the social practice of a passive-receptive social actor who acts voluntarily as member of various groups.

Returning to the most generally accepted definition of values as shared conceptions of what is socially desirable, and taking into account these theoretical limits, we can better appreciate the epistemological virtues and flaws of the functionalist version of that definition: values are abstract conceptions having a certain cohesive social function, which exist as coherent systems, both at a macrosocial and an individual level (Kluckhohn, 1951). As variables they are associated, like norms or ideologies, to socio-cultural orientations of social groups, affecting social practice in all its diversity.

2. Socialization and professional role

2.1. Professional role and group identity

Researching primary groups, Grusec (2002) comes to understand socialization as being the process by which individuals are socially assisted in acquiring the skills necessary to function in their group of belonging. Individuals share common values because they come to belong to those communities. They acquire knowledge and skills, and at the same time internalize attitudes, norms and values in order to act in accordance with the various social role expectations of those communities (Henslin, 2015). Sharing an occupational subculture, has become a prerequisite to participation in nowadays professionalized society. That is why, from an organizational point of view, educational socialization can be described as a process through which a newcomer becomes, for example, a member of a university study program, gradually acquiring the social knowledge and skills in order to assume a future role in a professional organization.

Understanding adult socialization as a continuous training process of preparing for future social roles, Hinshaw (1977) observes that it involves emulating the identity of valued members of social groups, the so-called role models (Merton, 1969), as means of accommodating, reacting to new sets of role expectations. That is why his general model of professional socialization can constitute a valid conceptual framework for the interpretation of socialization and resocialization as processes of assuming a new professional role. I chose to mention it here for the reason that it accounts for both the change and conflict of values that the socialization process entails, and because it is especially applicable to the period of educational socialization.

Professional socialization can be described as a process of resocialization, which depends on the availability of role models. There are three successive stages.

The first stage involves the transition from anticipatory role expectations to specific professional role expectations as defined by the social reference group.

The second stage is attachment to significant others. Individuals identify significant others in occupational group regarding it as a new normative system of social relations. In the educational environment they may be teachers or even colleagues, who became role models (Hinshaw, 1977).

The third and last stage consists in internalizing, more or less effectively, the values and occupational standards of the professional role. It can be a matter of simple conformity, when the individual acts as part of the group to receive positive feedback from those around him, of selective identification, when only certain components of the social role are chosen, not necessarily the values associated with it, or it may be internalization when individuals accept and effectively appropriate the values and norms of the professional role.

2.2 Individual autonomy versus social constraint: an old dilemma

The process of professional socialization is, first of all, a dynamic one, involving the constant abandonment of old roles and self-concepts and the acquisition of new ones. It consists in learning through formal education and professional training, the knowledge and necessary skills, and adopting values, behaviors and attitudes necessary to assume the professional role (Merton, 1969). It is a selective acquisition of values and attitudes, interests, and skills and knowledge, in short, the current culture in a group to which individuals seek to belong. From an educational point

of view, professional socialization refers to both the intended and unintended consequences of following a program of study (Merton, 1969).

The two epistemological poles of the relationship between the normative group and socialized individual are individual autonomy and social constraints (Merton, 1957). The reason individuals are induced into a certain culture, in our case an occupational group culture, is a functional one: they have to meet the role requirements established within that particular social structure (Wanous, 1992). At macrosocial level, significant changes in the social structure can make certain professional categories necessary. Consequently, new occupational groups appear. Those who want to be part of them assume the attitudes, internalize the values and assimilate the behaviors prescribed at the group level.

If social structures are socializing factors that act upon the individual then socialization is basically a social control mechanism exercised through positive and negative sanctions, depending on the extent to which role behaviors correspond to role expectations. Approached through the lens of social control, professional socialization appears to be the final result of the adoption or assimilation by newcomers of the values and attitudes strongly associated with a certain profession. Socialization through education and professional practice appears closely related to the content of that role. Shared values and internalized norms have the function of legitimizing professional role expectations, always imposed "from the top down". The end result of professional socialization is a functional professional status-role. The acquisition of a new role "initiates" the individual into a specific social group. Individual autonomy still exists because it involves a choice between several possible reference roles.

In this context, Merton (1957, 1969) coined the term "role model" and hypothesized that individuals constantly compare themselves to groups that already hold status and play the social role they aspire to, called reference groups. The term role model can apply to any person or group who serves as an example and whose behavior is emulated by others (Merton, 1957). The concept is of direct interest to us because reference group theory has been successfully applied to academic socialization research. Reference group practices are considered by aspiring members an evaluation standard for their own practices. As far as we are concerned, the reference group is that professional category that current students aspire to be a part of, after completing their studies. The period of university studies can then be treated as anticipatory professional socialization. Understood as

interaction with the role models, this process involves student's immersion in a culture with well-defined expectations and standards of action.

2.3. The interactionist critique and the hidden virtues of a functionalist approach

Merton's socialization theory is based on two main theoretical assumptions formulated by Parsons (1954). They appear to be pretty limitative. The first is that values have a consensual function, that they always act to maintain social order. The second is that culture acts as a relatively external reality to a relatively passive individual, an individual who receives knowledge and eventually adopts with little discrimination the ideologies, attitudes and values proposed to him.

Alternatively, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the occupational group and the individual socialized for a specific professional role influence each other. Professional socialization can still be conceived as a process of discovering and assuming new social roles, but that requires a continuous modification of the very content of the role, as the individual enters different work environments with potentially very different challenges.

Academic socialization involves interaction between students and the university social environment, interaction during which students participate in the creation and recreation of their future professional roles (Miller, 2010). Still, the new learning situations presuppose both well-defined organizational structures and the emergence of specific professional cultures. That is why the actual content of these roles continues to depend on the way social groups internally define their interactions.

Regarding how value orientations develop through socialization, Kuczynski and Parkin (2007) argue that functionalist approaches do not sufficiently account for the individual agency of social actors. Students play a more active role in their own professional socialization. Entering educational institutions students change or amend their own value systems by rejecting or selectively adopting the norms, beliefs, and values of the profession they chose.

The criticism of the functionalist theory of professional socialization can be summed up in the following three statements.

First of all, starting from the premise that the socialization processes are completely controlled by the educational staff, functionalism analyzes formal education as a socialization process starting from the premise that students are absolutely subordinate and completely

dependent on their teachers. Students are not relatively passive recipients of knowledge, and that includes professional values. Therefore, functionalism cannot sufficiently take into account the problem of the conflict of values that often affects the educational processes as a way of socializing new values, attitudes and behaviors.

Secondly, functionalist approaches tend to consider university curriculum the main culturally relevant process that ensures the assimilation of the attitudes and values of the respective professions, losing sight of the role of inter-individual interactions, especially the emergence of student subcultures during academic socialization. The social context of professional socialization is never limited to the teaching-learning process, but extends to all aspects of everyday student life (Lave et al., 1991).

That being said, a functionalist view of academic socialization has its virtues. When taken into consideration from an interactionist perspective, professional socialization appears as an epistemologically circular process. Being influenced by the social context and influencing it in return, individuals actively define and play their own professional roles. There are two difficulties.

First of all, it means that value systems influence individual behavior, depending on absolutely particular situations. Furthermore, a constantly changing social behavior cannot be analyzed. We cannot start sociological research from such an assertion.

Secondly, we face a serious methodological limitation: assuming an interactionist paradigm would only lead to qualitative studies whose conclusions cannot be easily generalized.

Conclusions

Although it has been criticized for not giving too much "chance" to values to vary at microsocial level, functionalism has noticed the discrete role that values play at the macrosocial level having an impact on vertical social mobility and educational attainment within secondary social groups.

Bearing in mind the empirically proven impact of structural variables such as class on value formation, Reference Group Theory as formulated by Merton is particularly relevant in matters of professional socialization because, although professional identities are developed

through interaction with peers and teachers, they are nonetheless legitimized within institutionalized frameworks.

Students enter educational institutions with their own value systems. Although it does not sufficiently take into account the possibility of a conflict of values that could have severe implications on the success of professional socialization, the functionalist paradigm satisfactorily explains value orientations at occupational group level.

The functionalist theorizing is more flexible from a methodological point of view because it also makes possible a quantitative approach to the problem of professional values, unlike interactionism which exclusively requires a qualitative one.

In conclusion, in matters like occupational preferences and career decisions, a functionalist analysis satisfactorily explains the transmission and acquisition of occupational norms and values at group level.

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