

Professions and Disciplines

*Functional and
Conflict Perspectives*

Daniel W. Rossides



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Preface

This text has been designed for courses on the professions and on occupations and work, and as a supporting text for courses on social stratification, the sociology of knowledge, the sociology and history of science and technology, social problems, education, business, and public policy. It should also prove useful in the capstone courses in which the various disciplines and professions check their bearings, assess their progress, and compare themselves to each other.

My goals in writing this book are:

1. To stimulate thought about the professions and disciplines by providing a macro sociological analysis of them, and by looking at them alternately through functional and conflict eyes. A glance at the table of contents will show that I have included the following in the universe of professions and disciplines: the field of education, the natural sciences, literary studies, the social sciences (with a special emphasis on sociology), the applied professions, the less-established or less-powerful professions, the policy professions, and the occupations of popular and elite culture with a special emphasis on the theme of professionalism that runs through their subject matter.

2. To introduce readers to the mode of thinking called the *sociology of knowledge*. This approach seeks to understand symbols in terms of their origins and functions in sociohistorical context. In another form, this approach is known as the *social construction of reality* approach. Both approaches have played a large part in nourishing the growth in recent decades of the major creative current in science, especially in sociology, anthropology, and literary studies, which sees science as inescapably interpretive in nature.

3. To provide readers with insights and information about the professions and disciplines especially in terms of their performance of social functions and their role in the modern (especially American) system of social power. A major theme of the text explores the need for a better blend of the academic disciplines, the applied professions, and the policy sciences, all as part of harnessing them to a better performance of social functions.

The study's organizing theme is a running contrast between the functional (mainstream academic) and the conflict (radical, sociopolitical) view of the professions and disciplines. The functional view of the liberal (capitalist) disciplines and professions sees them as nonpartisan, value-free, objective pursuers of truth and appliers of knowledge. It acknowledges that the disciplines and professions have deficiencies: commercialism, bias, fraud, incompetence, monopolistic practices, jurisdictional disputes, resort to politics, and so on. To its credit, the mainstream (along with critical studies) has identified conflicts and contradictions in the professions. It now knows that professionals deviate widely from their ideals and that they contain important deficiencies. For example, the functional view no longer accepts the claim by the professions that they have a qualitatively unique knowledge base, or that they are altruistic servers of humanity. And it no longer accepts the claim that the professions are (or deserve to be) autonomous—they are beholden to powerful clients, engage in incessant turf battles, and not only subordinate their support labor, but each other. Nonetheless, the mainstream approach continues to believe that the professions are endowed with a transhistorical force, science, that their objective knowledge will gradually enter society's bloodstream, and that their method for deciding between the true and the false will one day characterize society's problem solving institutions.

The conflict view accepts the important criticisms that have emerged from the conventional view of the knowledge elites. But it goes further to argue that the professions and disciplines are essentially value-laden, political, and biased, with a highly deficient record of solving social problems. Conflict analysts argue that the liberal professions have failed to solve, or even to keep up with society's problems, because their training and operating assumptions amount to a "trained incapacity" (Veblen), especially an inability to understand the institutional-power structure that causes problems. Actually, say critics, the professions appear to be an integral part of the institutions and groups that are the cause of social problems. Far from being transhistorical, science is an emergent of history and tends to accept and serve whatever system of national power it happens to be in.

America's professions and disciplines still have a self-image and still use an ideology to promote their interests derived from the small-scale entrepreneurial economy of the nineteenth century (with many vestiges from feudalism). Knowledge elites think of themselves (not so much privately as in their public utterances) as autonomous, self-reliant, versatile, and adaptable because of their unique and superior knowledge and skills. They also claim to be serving individuals and society because their knowledge and skills are available to all, or can be, given economic growth and more funds to enlarge research and improve access by those unable to avail themselves of existing services. The academic view of the professions tends to endorse this view.

The radical view argues that the professions and disciplines are now increasingly the employees of large-scale hierarchies, their work prescribed, circumscribed, and funded by others. By and large, they are the dedicated, well-rewarded, "trusted servants" of a society (power structure) they ap-

pear not to understand. That power structure now stretches across the apexes of the various hierarchies they work for and even beyond our borders to connect with the apexes of hierarchies in other countries. The role played by America's professions in its expansion abroad, however, has not been studied and constitutes a rich field for future research.

The social construction of knowledge has come to be widely accepted in the sociology of science thanks both to academic and conflict theorists. Marxists, phenomenologists, and feminists have been especially influential in gaining acceptance of the view that science is a form of social behavior and that it depends on and is shaped by sociopolitical forces. It should be noted that creative currents in academic functionalism have also moved toward the interpretive position (for example, Jeffrey Alexander and Anthony Giddens). Analyzing the differences in the use of the interpretive method by functional and conflict analysts of the professions forms a main theme of the text.

The text also shows that our otherwise different disciplines and professions have all begun to realize that they neither generate nor apply knowledge according to the idealized traditional image. All disciplines and professions now have significant minorities that acknowledge that their particular science is inescapably reliant on metaphor, myth, narrative, stereotypes, values, informal negotiations and understandings, and so on. One of the purposes of this text is to show the diverse ways in which the disciplines and professions display this feature in common.

The social construction of reality does not mean that the principles established by physics or that structures of deviant behavior identified by sociology are false or a product of fanciful thinking. It means that knowledge is generated on a selective basis within a dominant world view that contains a hierarchy of what constitutes knowledge and what is worth knowing. In turn, that world view is constructed haphazardly and incompletely by history's power groups. Another way of saying all this is to note that science is inescapably based on assumptions from start to finish and that its principles and empirical structures are interpretations of facts, themselves collected according to assumptions.

The differences between the functional and conflict perspectives revolve around other issues besides epistemology. The conflict or sociopolitical view also argues that the academic sociology of the professions has failed to raise questions about their actual efficacy in solving social problems. In addition, when questions are raised about other issues, it is done selectively. The political activities of the professions are noted, for example, but not that the professions are *essentially* political.

The sociopolitical view also rejects the early functional view that the hierarchy of occupations and their differential rewards came from differences in the inherent complexity and intellectually demanding nature of work. One consequence of this false view, it is argued, is that the professions require excessive schooling. The radical perspective disputes the need for long years of schooling (calling the process *credentialism*) and emphasizes that most forms of work are much easier to do than we have been led to believe. Along the same lines, the academic or functional perspective has

uncritically accepted the argument that the professions are meritocratic and has failed to emphasize that they are also deeply structured by racism, ethnicity, and sexism. Also not emphasized is the similarity between the way professionals exploit their support labor and the way in which it is done in the wider society. In addition, the professions and disciplines are stratified among themselves and deeply stratified internally. Indeed, the diversification of professions and disciplines is now so far advanced that the terms *doctor, lawyer, professor*, and so on are relatively meaningless. Note must also be taken that the “free” or solo professional has not only given way to professionals that live out their lives in the many bureaucracies that make up corporate capitalism, but like the rest of the labor force, they too are being squeezed and stratified by centralizing pressures.

The conventional view of the professions has also failed to identify their role in the creation of the American nation state; instead, the academic world and the professions themselves emphasize their contribution to its natural unfolding. As we see, almost all disciplines (the natural sciences, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, history, psychology, literary studies) were shaped both in what they studied and in their conclusions about the world by the emotions of nationalism. Also missing from the mainstream’s study of the professions is its neglect of the enormous amount of deviance exhibited by the professions, their similarity in this regard with America’s other elites, and the skilled collusion that takes place among propertied, professional, and political elites to yield socially damaging and difficult to detect departures from both public and private norms and values.

The problem solving record of knowledge elites suggests that we must rethink our understanding of them. That same evidence suggests that improving them means more than developing a better epistemology or education. If the disciplines and professions are deficient, perhaps problematic, it may be because modern society is deficient and perhaps problematic. If we want better thinking and policies, our findings about the professions and disciplines suggest that we must redesign the groups and group networks (corporations, business associations, governing boards, research institutes and departments, voluntary groups of all kinds, including foundations and political parties, legislatures, executive branches of government, social control agencies, therapeutic organizations, advisory groups, undergraduate and graduate academic departments and professional associations) that constitute the American structure of power. If, as this study argues, a society’s knowledge can never be much at odds with the power structure that generates it, then perhaps we need to stop assuming that we can improve society through what now passes for science. Perhaps we need also to think of redesigning society to yield the knowledge we need.

Daniel W. Rossides

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1

Social Power, the Nature of Knowledge, and the Knowledge Professions



THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

- Thinking about Thought
- The Sociology of Science
- The Politics of Truth
- The Focus of the Study

TYPE OF SOCIETY, TYPE OF KNOWLEDGE, AND TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL

- Simple Societies
- Advanced Horticultural and Agrarian Societies
- Ancient Greece: The Creation of a Rational Universe by a Unique Society
- Modern Society: Capitalism and Modern Science

SOCIAL POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE KNOWLEDGE PROFESSIONS

- The Fiction of a Knowledge Society
- Symbolic Activity and the Needs of Power
- The Rise of the Professions: National Contexts and Variations

SUMMARY

NOTES



The starting point for an inquiry into the professions and disciplines is to ask some basic questions about the nature of knowledge and human thought: Under what conditions do knowledge and rational thought arise, do they take distinctive forms under different systems of society, what is the relation between knowledge and practice? Answering such questions is the province of the *sociology of knowledge*.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Thinking about Thought

The term *knowledge* (as opposed to information, data, facts) means knowing why things or people behave as they do: the solar system, plants, the human body, a septic tank, consumers, voters, spouses, artists, scientists, theologians, groups, the human personality, society, and so on. Knowledge about causation is also a “capacity for action,” as Stehr emphasizes. When, how, and why we act depends on sociopolitical conditions, as Stehr reminds us, noting that it is easier to act on natural-science knowledge than social-science knowledge.¹

The sociological specialty, the sociology of knowledge, strives for knowledge about how knowledge itself develops. It asks, Under what social conditions can knowledge about something be generated? In studying belief, moral, and aesthetic systems, it assumes that human creations, spiritual no less than material, and whether lodged in the personality or social relations, are social and historical phenomena. The sociology of knowledge also wants to know under what conditions knowledge is put to use. What prompts the “capacity for action” to become knowledge in practice?

The goal of the sociology of knowledge, therefore, is to explain an important part of human behavior (thinking, feeling, creating symbols, evaluating).² In seeking answers, the sociology of knowledge can take a broad historical perspective and study, for example, the social conditions that spawned modern legal and political philosophy, Protestant-bourgeois morality, or the modern professions and disciplines. Or it can assume a microsociological form and study the emergence of norms from play groups, explain the thought of theorists by referring to their family experiences or religious background, seek to understand a natural science outcome in terms of social relations in a laboratory, or show how divorce law is constructed in part by the interaction of lawyer and client.

Analyzing the social sources of symbols is widespread and appears under various guises. The current, more fashionable term for it is the *social construction* of something, even reality itself. A great deal of our understanding of social problems, for example, has resulted from sociologists probing into socially generated definitions of crime, mental illness, mental retardation, disease, gendered occupations, and so on. Both reformers and radicals employ the constructionist perspective in an effort to show that a