

An Investigation of "Professionalism" In Thai Private University

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of assessing the educational quality system has been a major concern for all parties who intentionally or unintentionally are involved. Even though the universal criteria to assess the academic effectiveness seem to be controversial, Kim S. Cameron (1978) contributes a breakthrough research, which instigates several structural and behavioral dimensions to assess organizations like universities. The ultimate rationale behind this article is that the academic quality of the Thai higher education can be linked and transacted under the concept of professionalism. In other words, the academic quality of a higher education institution depends very much on the degree of professionalism possessed by that particular institute. Secondly, this article attempts to point out how the professionalism concept can be adopted to assess the educational quality. Finally the intent of this article is to provide a conceptual model that instigates some of the relevant factors that may influence or severely impact the professionalism in the Thai higher education institutions.

When the writer defines the concept of professionalism, it is discouraging to discover that no single dimension of professionalism has been agreed upon among the Western and Oriental scholars. Nor is there agreement on what dimensions constitute the concept of professionalism. Admittedly, it is not mistaken to state that the concept of professionalism has been originated in the work of Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1934), *"The Profession"*. Tracing down from the time of Carr-Saunders and Wilson, the writer discovers that four main approaches have emerged into the field of "sociology of profession" and "professionalism".

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2. APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONALISM

2.1 Trait Approach

The trait approach which is pioneered by Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1934) attempts to identify the common attributes that have the capacity to discriminate those lay occupations from the professions. However, as admitted by these early contributors, the universal characteristics of professions, however, reveal, neither agreement about the manner or types of trait nor consensus about the range of attributes to be included in defining the professionalism.

2.2 Institutional Approach

In order to alleviate the gap of the trait approach, many scholars during late 1950s to the beginning of 1960s, have analyzed the professions in terms of process of institutional or associational development. The progress of an occupation towards the professional status may be gauged by referring to a sequence of events and stages. Caplow (1966) has observed five stages which he claims are readily applicable to “any professionalizing” occupations; (1) the establishment of a professional association; (2) a change in a name of the occupation; (3) the development of the code of ethics; (4) prolonged agitation to obtain the support from the public; and (5) the concurrent development of training facilities.

2.3 Legalistic Approach

The legalistic approach points out that the hallmark of a profession is not the possession of certain attributes but the recognition of its status by the State (Lansbury, 1978). Numerous commentators have noted that most recognized professions have gained legal protection. Furthermore, most occupations which seek to professionalize obtain legal protection to maintain or expand their control over the practices of the occupation (Friedman, 1962)

2.4 Functional Process Approach

This perspective of looking and investigating the issue of profession is initiated by Bucher and Strauss (1961) who portray a profession as a relatively homogenous community whose members share a common identity, values, a common definition of role, and so on. The functional process approach attempts to present a view on

profession as "loose amalgamation of segments pursuing different objectives and delicately held together under a common name at a particular period in time".

Regarding the above mentioned four approaches of investigating the issue of professions and professionalism, the author admits that all kinds of occupations in a given society, in general, need to strive for a better social prestige and acceptance by striving toward professionalization. As one scholar has noted that the professionalization of an occupation has been historically espoused with status, prestige, and self-esteem attached to the pursuit of career.

3. DIVERGENT VIEWS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

Referring to the literature reviews organized by Abbot (1988), it is possible to reorganize the perspectives of approaching professionalism as follows:

3.1 Functional View

In this perspective, professions are a means to control asymmetric client-expert relationships. Those early scholars who are classified as functionalist are such as Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1934) and Talcott Parsons (1954).

3.2 Structuralist View

To this perspective of professionalization, profession is only a form of occupational control, and the content of work to expert-client relationships seems less important to them. The structuralists attempt to explain why the professions of interests become as they are according to displayed properties and attributes. The scholar who pioneers on this perspective is Harold Wilensky (1964).

3.3 Monopolist View

The monopolists share similar views to that of functionalists and desire to understand the growth of an occupation according to dominance and authority. According to Larson (1977), one of the distinguished pioneers for this perspective, the control of the professions on a particular society is interesting insofar as it is attached with status and power enjoyed by a small group of people.

3.4 Cultural Authority View

Bledstein (1976) has pointed out the movement of focus from functional aspects of profession to a Parsonian's "utility" of expertise as a social function. Not only Bledstein

(1976) but also Haskell (1977) attempts to understand the professionalization by investigating upon "cultural legitimation" as a criteria for professionalism.

4. THEORETICAL DIMENSIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM

Given the four approaches and perspectives of understanding the concept of professionalism, at this moment, it can be officially defined. Moore (1970: 6) defines the professionalism as:

"The possession of esoteric knowledge and skills, based on specialized training or education of exceptional duration and perhaps of exceptional difficulty. The professional is expected to exhibit a service orientation, to perceive the needs of individuals or collective clients that relevant to his competence and to attend to those needs by competent performance. Finally, in the use of his or her exceptional knowledge, the professional proceeds by his own judgment and authority; he (or she) enjoys autonomy restrained by responsibility."

From this definition of professionalism, Sninek (1972) has extracted five core elements to define the theoretical dimensions of professionalism.

4.1 Professional Organization or Colleague Community as Major Referent

According to William E. Sninek (1972), the reliance on professional organization; whether or not it is legally established or informal group (colleague consciousness), will help reinforce the attitudes, beliefs, practice standards and identity to its members. A member holding such attitude is believed to be strongly influenced by the standards of profession.

4.2 Beliefs in Public Services

To this dimension of professionalism, the profession itself must be largely perceived by public as a critical link to central values and norms of that particular society. In contrast, all other occupations that hold within itself all attributes from "abstract body of knowledge" to "tough entry requirements" generally fail on professionalism scale as it is not actually linked to the central needs of society at large.

4.3 Beliefs in Self-Regulation

This dimension connotes that since the task of a professional is so sophisticated that only the specialists with common state of specialized knowledge will have authority to verify the quality of his works and judgment. Due to this complication, beliefs in self-

regulation may also be applied to control exerted by the group of colleagues who are eligible to judge his or her peer's works.

4.4 Sense of Calling to the Field

This dimension represents the normative element of professionalism in the meaning that the professional needs to devote his lifetime to his work. His contentment is derived from pursuing the works for intrinsic satisfaction rather than monetary compensation (Greenwood, 1957:33). The sense of calling to the field also encompasses the beliefs in the professionals that he or she would be able to contribute the significant part of his or her expertise to the utmost enlightenment of his disciplinary field.

4.5 Autonomy

It is commonsensical to state that the professional must be provided with sufficient latitudes to carry his or her own work with the least external pressure. Due to expertise sophistication, autonomy given to the professional is one of the means that allows him or her to be creative, innovative and overcome breakthrough in his specialized field.

5. RELEVANCY OF PROFESSIONALISM TO THE THAI HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

As long as the academic quality of the higher education institutes in Thailand is still a major concern for both policy makers and educational administrators, it will not be mistaken to state that the concept of professionalism is not only relevant but also necessary to gauge the academic effectiveness of a particular educational institute.

After the survey of literature concerning the characteristics of the Thai educational system, it is interesting to discover that the Thai higher education institutions have been, for the past years, established with aims which are to provide qualified labor to the governmental sector during the reign of King Rama V; to act politically as buffer to avoid direct confrontation between multiple offending political parties; to promote certain categories of professions to serve national development objectives during Marshall P. Phibulsongkhram; and to supply qualified labors according to what is dictated by the government transcended down from the National Economic and Social Development objectives (Sinlarat, 1996). Not surprisingly, it is found that the higher education institutions in Thailand have been planned and administered on an ad hoc basis without an integrative direction provided by the responsible authority since its

outset (Kasetsart University, 1997). Besides the ad hoc basis of educational management, the author discovers that the establishment of the Thai higher education institutions has not been laid out properly to provide academic contributions to the country. However, it has been a reaction of the government in order to meet demands of public.

As a result, the on-going establishment of higher education without integrative objectives has adversely resulted a discrepancy between what the higher education institutions "ought" to perform and what they have currently performed (Kasetsart University, 1997). Therefore, the idea of having one university as a source of offering new knowledge to the society, a place for learning and researching, a place for community services, and a place for maintaining the national culture and identity seems to deviate from what one normally expects.

As present, there are approximately 20 public universities and 35 private universities. Most of them are situated in Bangkok and its adjacent areas whereas the rests are disparately in certain large provincial areas. All of them seem to assess themselves by either use of arbitrary criteria or a top-down supervision from the Ministry of University Affairs to ensure their academic effectiveness (Kasetsart University, 1997).

Therefore, the professionalism concept in assessing academic effectiveness of the Thai universities is relevant as there exist certain reasons.

- 1) As far as the university instructors are considered as social engineers, and social development administrators, the professionalism of instructors will affect the quality of teaching directly, future research and development, social norms, moral behaviors and values, and religious and cultural identity.
- 2) As having agreed on the professionalism concept as an ideal typical concept, it can possibly provide explanations and predictions of the behavior of individuals and organization as a whole in the educational system.
- 3) An in-depth understanding of professionalism will facilitate educational administrators to design or even redesign their academic organizations in order to accommodate the new conception of educational governance.
- 4) As long as the professionalism affects the academic quality of that particular institute, a proper understanding of the professionalism concept will enhance the linkages between academic quality and organizational effectiveness.

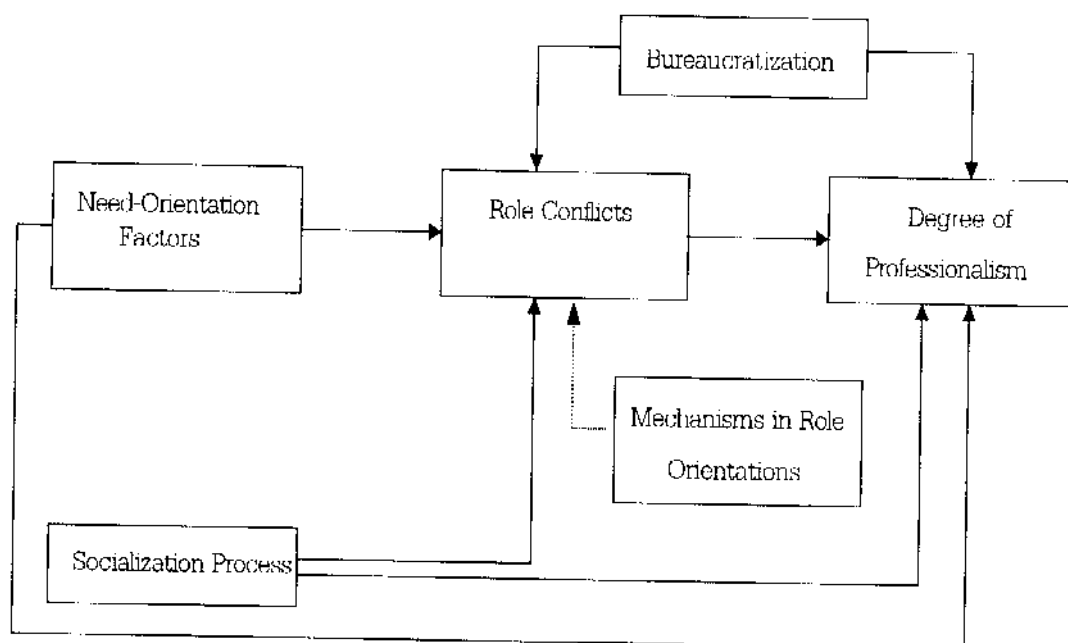
- 5) The professionalism concept will become the basis on which the academic organization may adopt in order to be part of its proactive actions for the university teaching profession as a whole

6. HYPOTHETICAL MODEL OF UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONALISM IN THE THAI HIGHER EDUCATION

The discussion in this section will mainly focus on exploration of the factors that are considered relevant to the analysis of professionalism in the Thai higher education institutions. The writer needs to admit at the outset that the hypothetical model proposed in this part is a portrayal of an extensive literature search in secondary data and personal interviews. In addition, attempts to construct models to prove or disprove social phenomena are intellectual quests that are praiseworthy.

The writer admits at the outset that this model does not embrace all relevant factors that relate to professionalism of the Thai higher education institutions but an attempt is made to keep the model as parsimonious as possible.

The basic idea behind the pursuit of this hypothetical model is that the concept of professionalism in the Thai higher education institutions (later called universities) can be explained by the concept of bureaucratization process, individual socialization stages, role conflicts and ambiguity and need-orientation factors. The broad premise guiding this model is that, firstly, based on the contradictory characteristics of professional and bureaucratic models. It is argued that the professionalism of the Thai universities is incompatible with the bureaucratic character of the universities. Secondly, as a result of clash between professional and bureaucratic models, the Thai university instructors will experience "role conflicts" as their role expectations do not match the requirements of the current administrative system. The role conflicts here can be accounted by the situation in which a professional whose works must be dependent upon a bureaucracy which relies on the counter-character of professional model. Finally, it is believed that the professionalism of a university is not the issue for the organizational context or task environments to account for, rather it is believed that the degree of professionalism of a Thai university is the resultant interaction of individual needs or motives and individual stages of socialization. Referring to these four main factors, an acute reader may observe that, within this model, the writer aims at ensuring to cover both the structural and behavioral aspects of the academic system.



Hypothetical Model Showing Factors Affecting Degree of Professionalism in Thai Higher Education Institutions

—————> Direct

—————> Extraneous

Referring to the enclosed diagram, it is hypothesized in the first place that the relationships among professionalism of the Thai universities are not unidimensional but represent a causal network of variables among themselves (Raehn, 1985,1985,1991). The process of bureaucratization initiated from the part of the organization to ensure behavioral standards and standardization of work processes is merely antithetical to the notion of professionalism possessed by the individual instructors. As Mintzberg (1993) has stipulated in his popular book of "Structure in Fives" that the process of bureaucratization is the "push" force on the part of the organization to ensure internal consistency, while the "pull" force from the professionals within the universities is exerted to ensure the necessary amount of discretionary autonomy to carry out their own tasks. This notion has also been supported by the studies by Hall (1967;1968;1985) that professionalization model casts the center on five main structural and attitudinal attributes; 1) creation of full-time occupation; 2) establishment of training school; 3) formation of professional organization; 4) development of sense of calling to the field; and 5) autonomy restrained by responsibility.

The residual impact of clash between professional and bureaucratic models is intensified in the form of role conflicts. The degree of role conflict experienced by the university instructors will be more exacerbated by the fact that how an individual has been socialized for the past years until he or she decides to join the teaching profession (Marcus, 1985). In absolute sense, the role orientations possessed by the professionals are more likely external induced, endorsed with the professional organization, and high organizational mobility or low loyalty to the employing organization (Goldner and Ritti, 1987). However, their role orientations do not remain in a vacuum but are interacting with the mechanism of role orientations held by the instructor and adopted by the organization. These mechanisms have encompassed: cognitive congruence, organization selection procedures and behavioral feedback. The different instructors may experience different degrees of role conflicts depending upon an instructor's position on one dimension (externally induced) and influencing his or her position on the other (high degree of organizational mobility). Moreover, role conflicts are also dependent upon the criteria the university adopts to recruit and screen the instructors. In other words, the organizational selection means that role association arises in the university because it emphasized highly on some dimensions of role orientations and uses these basis for screening its members (Child, 1972). Lastly, the intensity of role conflict which depends on an instructor's position on one dimension affects some aspects of his or her behavior, which in turn influences his or her position on the other dimension. Thus an instructor's role orientation may shift according to the opportunities to behave in a particular way (Tuma and Grimes, 1981)

Besides, the role orientation and its associated mechanisms, the professionalism of the university instructor can be accounted by the way in which one uniquely socializes either before or after joining the teaching profession. The model herewith does not rely on the significance of professional socialization alone as the most influential socializing factor, but also considers other factors such as prior experience, determination on profession, social origin and so on. They can be sub-divided under the pre-arrival stage to being instructor in the university. Connecting to this, the encounter period of socialization is also considered crucial as it shapes one's professionalism. During the encounter period, it is commonly found that the patterns of organizational demands and socialization should have a large impact on their professionalism. It is hypothesized that the patterns of organizational demands and socialization that reinforce the professional values of being instructor should improve the degree of professionalism

realized by the instructors. In contrast, the university whose patterns of work demands and organizational socialization that do not stress the professional values may even exacerbate the role conflicts that are required to be resolved by the individual instructors the university or both parties. Finally the metamorphosis of socialization that encompasses the way in which the instructor becomes attached to profession; the professional identification, and the professional entrepreneurship have been regarded as important socializing steps because the instructor can demonstrate their attachment to the profession. The professional identification and entrepreneurship are normally reflected by the ways in which instructors become attached to the professional norms. The professional behaviors reflected by professional identification can be expressed through more number of research, the greater reliance and respect on the code of professional ethics, and the eagerness to conduct research in order to satisfy his or her own individual internal need.

The last but not least, need-orientation factors driven by the instructor have been considered important as they explain the professionalism possessed by the respective university. It is expected that the internal job motive, the need for power and inter-external locus of control of an individual university instructor can discriminate the instructors who possess a higher degree of professionalism from their counterparts. Individual specific factors added to the model do not intend to make the model simply sophisticated. Nevertheless, the writer of this article truly believes that the individual specific need-orientation factors will improve the predictive power of the model of professionalism especially in the Thai cultural context.

In short, the model of professionalism of the Thai higher education is constructed under the basis of logical connections among relevant factors in the causal chain model. As a result, the writer highly expects that there exists an opportunity to approve or disprove this hypothetical model which is in the stage of work-in-progress. Truly, the author wishes that this hypothetical model, after it has been justified and verified with empirical data, will provide a theoretical basis for further studies in the professionalism of universities in the future.

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