



Protective and connective professionalism: What we have learned and what we still would like to learn

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins with a contribution from Mirko Noordegraaf, author of the 2020 ‘From Protective to Connective Professionalism’ article that initiated this series of exchanges in the *Journal of Professions and Organization* (*JPO*). Then, wrapping up this series, David Brock, *JPO* Editor-in-Chief, looks back at protective and connective constructs in our literature, and suggests several research directions. Our aim is not to close the debate, but to open it up and connect it to promising research avenues, newly arising research strands and promising publications.

KEYWORDS: connect; protect; professions

MIRKO NOORDEGRAAF ‘SOCIETALIZING’ PROFESSIONALISM: A REPLY TO COMMENTARIES ON CONNECTIVE PROFESSIONALISM

With great interest and joy, I read the various commentaries in which well-known and well-respected authors critically reflected on my earlier *Journal of Professions and Organization* (*JPO*) paper ‘From Protective to Connective Professionalism’ (2020). This is highly stimulating, first and foremost intellectually, not in the least because many of these authors are behind the arguments I presented, in one way or the other. I have used their work, I have organized panels with some of them, I have discussed (changing) professionalism with them during conferences, etc. In addition to intellectually stimulating, the various commentaries are also highly valuable, as they underscore certain key issues in both the debates on

and practices of professionalism. In this brief Reply, I will primarily explore these key issues and I will refine the key message of my 2020 paper. Before I do so, I will say a few things about the value of the commentaries that were published; at the end, I will sketch the ways forward, inspired by the discussion.

THE VALUE OF (CRITICAL) COMMENTARIES

In academia, it is essential to have critical debates that move forward, but that will never be finished. In academic analyses, there is no ‘end point’, despite the fact that others and outside worlds might expect final results. The various commentaries that have been published in *JPO*, following my Connective Professionalism paper, are shaping such a debate. More specifically, I think the value is threefold.

First and foremost, the commentaries underscore various ‘flaws’ in my 2020 paper, varying from a lack of precision, conceptual ambiguity, lack of theoretical direction, a neglect of history, and context, etc. Although the authors value the paper and like these kinds of theorization, most also ‘don’t buy it’, at least not directly and completely. Most authors have mixed feelings, nicely expressed in one of the papers (Faulconbridge, Henriksen and Seabrooke 2021) when they say: ‘We think that Noordegraaf is right. And wrong’. Such a ‘mixed feeling’ stance is very healthy: a few essences of available bodies of knowledge on professionalism should be ‘protected’ (to use one of the key terms in my paper), while we should ‘connect’ these bodies of knowledge to other forms of expertise and to real-life developments. In other words, the commentaries are valuable because they conserve *and* innovate, which is crucial for a lively academic field.

Second, taken together, the critical commentaries provide a nice ‘mini summary’ of the various essences or core components of academic analyses of professionalism: the usage of ideal types; professionalism as both ideology and practice; evolutionary institutionalism; technology; stratification, power, and inequality; power hierarchies and authority systems; agency; organizations; accountability; and so on. For interested readers and young scholars, this is a great entry into long-standing debates, carried by many authoritative scholars (including the ones who wrote the commentaries). This discussion is not so much a matter of ‘stock taking’ and assessing the ‘state of the field’—which can be quite boring—but a lively exchange of ideas, fueled by a few emotions. That is why it is all the more interesting to read and reply.

Finally, in many of the critical commentaries, ideas are raised about how to move on and how to renew certain aspects of the wider debate on professionalism. This does not eliminate the key issues raised, on the contrary, but provides productive avenues for further research, which—to be clear—are already available and are occurring while we speak. This is a very hopeful observation.

THE KEY ISSUES

As argued, the various authors highlight multiple ‘flaws’, varying from minor to bigger flaws. I guess

the biggest flaw is the ‘grand’ and ‘paradigmatic’ nature of my 2020 piece. The paper sounds and feels as if I am forcing a field to renew itself, along the lines of contemporary and new thoughts that I as an author have developed and of which others are unaware. Apart from the dichotomy ‘protective versus connective’, to which I turn beneath, I think the paper generates a binary feeling of ‘old versus new’. Many readers will feel that the author neglects and/or discards earlier, available and long-standing insights, and that he suggests he has ‘seen the light’, which others apparently ‘do not see’. This, in turn, explains why some of the commentaries criticize ‘straw man’ arguments, argue that many of the proposed ideas are ‘not new’, state that the piece is ‘provocative’, and show that connective dimensions have always been part of many professional fields. I recognize these reader feelings, and I am aware of the risks of a ‘grand’ paper that propagates a binary paradigm. At the same time, to get a *message* across, we sometimes have to go beyond detailed descriptions and refined analyses.

Speaking about the message, what was my message and how does it relate to the various critical points raised? Let me start by stressing the fact that I struggled with the paper, not only with its overall ‘tone’ but also with its main ingredients.

First, I struggled with the tension between description and analysis on the one hand, and prescription and normativity on the other. As one of the commentators stressed (which I also explained in this and earlier papers), an ideal type is not an ideal. In my 2020 paper, one ideal type (or ‘descriptive type’, as one of the commentators explained) seems to be an ideal: I seem to suggest that I favor connective professionalism over protected professionalism. In many ways, I do, not so much because connective professionalism would be ideal as such, but because connectivity is neglected in many studies and papers. In other words, I would like to restore the balance.

Second, I struggled with the tension between presenting a rather generic argument, valid across place and time, on the one hand, and remaining open to specific elaborations and applications, on the other hand. The argument might be specific in three ways: one, professional realms and fields might differ; two, geographical areas might differ, such as states, and/or geography might change, for example, when

professional fields and services are becoming transnational; third, time evolves, periods of time might differ, professionalism is moving and evolving. Although I specify the argument, I remain rather generic, to make a bigger point, running through concrete practices and practical developments.

Third, I struggle with presenting a rather clean, nice and neat picture of authoritative professional practices on the one hand and emphasizing the fuzzy, political, and sometimes harsh realities of professionalism on the other. As most commentators argued, let us not forget the multitude of institutional, social, economic, technological and cultural realities in which professionals act, cases and clients are treated, professional services are rendered and (re)organized, and professional regimes are set-up and attacked. This includes (visible or invisible) political and power dynamics, ideological fights, and societal outcomes, including inequalities. At the same time, there are many empirical indications of enjoyable interprofessional practices, the rise of workable procedures, the effective usage of technologies, etc. So, let us not only focus on the difficult sides of professionalism.

Fourth, I struggled with the tension between structures on the one hand, including institutional settings and regimes, and actors and agency on the other. As many of the commentators show, the paper lacks both organizational and professional points of view, and they are right. But they are also wrong, as I try to provide examples of changing professional practices, in the medical, academic, and legal field, which include living people (academics, medical doctors, judges) and real-life acts and behaviors. At the same time, I go beyond identifiable agents, also due to the bigger message: professionalism happens 'in between'.

Fifth and finally, I struggled with clarifying the nature of connectivity, and its effects on expertise, autonomy and authority, which on the one hand presupposes static and fixed entities (such as 'a field'), and at the same time, privileges relations and processes. Obviously, this relates to available perspectives on the relational sides of professionalism, but I tried to overcome rather reluctant relational perspectives. Connectivity is more than 'crossing boundaries', 'collaborating' with others, and/or 'coproducing' services.

THE KEY MESSAGE

This brings me to a more fundamental key issue, underlying all previous points—if not the key message I was trying to convey. I think that a connective and therefore relational and processual view upon professionalism is not so much a matter of highlighting the realities of professionalism and the constructed nature of professional fields, working together with other fields and trying to find a 'place' in complex ecologies of practice. I think it is a matter of being aware that professionals do *not* produce professionalism, even if they produce 'professionals' and regulate 'professional' acts and practices. The outside world does. What professionals are, whether they are strong, whether they are seen, how they are perceived, whether they are legitimate, this all depends on actors and factors outside professional realms. This is not a new insight, far from it, but it has to be stressed. The reasons for stressing this are twofold.

First and foremost, I think much academic work on professionalism is rather inward-looking (apart from the work of the commentators, of course!). Many scholars are studying things like 'professional identities' or 'acts' or 'coping', *within* specific professional domains, *in* specific service situations. When they relate this to 'outside' events, they most often relate it to 'neoliberal policies' and/or 'new public management'. This is far too simple, both because new public management is not an alien forces but societal as well, and because much more societal developments are going on. Including far-reaching technological developments, such as machine learning and AI, as many commentators are discussing. If scholarly work on professionalism wants to be and remain relevant, we have to broaden our views and '*societalize*' data gathering and debates.

Second, in many political, policy, public, and professional practices, 'the professional' is still seen as an autonomous actor—even an 'institutional agent'—and professionalism is seen as something 'given', not in the least by professionals themselves. This, by the way, also includes us, academic professionals. Instead of reproducing protective views—'leave us professionals alone', 'let us free', 'respect our autonomies', etc—it is more fruitful to open up and reinterpret the work of professionals. Instead of seeing the professional as the prime agent for dealing with cases and clients and delivering high-quality services, it is

more fruitful to acknowledge the fact that quality is secured in processes, and not by persons.

High-quality higher education, for example, is not generated by individual teachers but by the interplay of teachers, support staff, managers, students, and other stakeholders. It is not based upon individual courses, delivered by individual teachers, but upon well-coordinated courses, both at the level of a course and the level of the curriculum, combined with well-chosen literature, cases, digital forms, guest contributions, student input, deadlines, appropriate examination, evaluations, and feedback. It is connected to relevant societal issues and concerns, is oriented toward learning, and is aimed at developing committed but critical attitudes. A focus on connective professionalism, to put it in simple terms, is about strengthening this awareness. Obviously, this still is contested, political, difficult, challenging, and the like, despite its normative underpinnings. In other words, it is ambivalent. Such ambivalence is important for sketching the ways forward.

THE WAY(S) FORWARD

The commentaries are not only expressing doubts and discussing flaws, they are also highlighting comparable perspectives in other scholarly works, indicating how existing studies can be improved, and presenting new thoughts on how to proceed. Similarly, they present multiple ways forward. I particularly like one crucial suggestion, given by many commentators: move beyond the dichotomous and binary distinction, if not opposition, between ‘protective versus connective’.

Instead, various authors suggest that these dimensions of professionalism can be interrelated. Faulconbridge, for example, strongly argues in favor of ‘protective connectedness’. Waring suggests a two-by-two table with ‘protective/connective’ combinations. Oliver and Avnoon discuss a table with types of connections, varying from highly integrated to fully rejected, at multiple levels of analysis. This, in turn, can be linked to the start of the Adams et al. (2020a) commentary: ‘The political, social and workplace landscapes that professionals navigate are becoming more complex and demanding’.

Such concrete suggestions enable us to develop better understandings of how *protected/connected* professionalism is *actually played out* and *working in*

real-life situations, with a clear focus on the *varieties of professionalism* (types of domains, countries, eras, etc) as well as the *politics of professionalism* (contestation, power, ideologies, inequality), with a clear sense of *agency* (at multiple levels), without getting (too) *normative*. Similarly, we can update and renew insights, but stick to the traditional key issues in describing, analyzing, and improving professionalism.

We can then leave the ‘grand’, paradigmatic and binary tone of the paper behind us and move toward more precise and productive analyses. But let us make sure these analyses stick to a *reversed point of view* (professionalism is constituted not inside but outside professional realms) and secure *societal perspectives* (professionalism occurs in changing societal landscapes).

CONCLUSION

My 2020 paper was rather ‘grand’ and paradigmatic, and was quite binary, which led to many legitimate criticisms, objections, and warnings. I hope I have made clear that I am aware of this, which I struggled with the paper, in multiple ways, but that I had a more overarching ambition. Instead of weakening long-standing and available debates on professionalism, I hope we can renew them, reinvigorate them, give them new meaning, relate them to changing societal landscapes, and link them to new groups of (younger) scholars. To do so, we need to stick to classic insights and the foundations of professionalism, we need to (re)apply the impressive number of relevant insights, but we should not forget that we as academic professionals have to ‘*societalize*’ professionalism. This was always important, but with rapidly changing societies, this is all the more important. In short, we have to protect and connect insights, at the same time.

DAVID M. BROCK

CONNECTIVE PROFESSIONALISM:

THE WAYS FORWARD. . .

The main message of the Noordegraaf (2020) ‘Protective or Connective Professionalism’ essay is that the professions are evolving from protective to connective modes. Protective professionalism emphasizes autonomy, closure, expertise, and the professional’s primary affiliation to the profession. Connective professionalism is more open,

Table 1. Ideal-typical differences between protective and connective professionalism

	I. Protective professionalism Fixed/closed off	II. Connective professionalism Relational/open
1. Expertise	Case-oriented Technical base, knowledge and skills Clear standards Training, codes, service ethic	Complex cases Interpersonal relations Distributed expertise Adaptive expertise, meta-cognitive skills Learning environments
2. Autonomy	Decisions taken by 'the' professional Independent Leeway, discretion No interference	Decision processes Interdependent Shared decision-making Supportive conditions (Social) experiences
3. Authority	Professional group Status and trust, legitimacy Stable positions	Professionals in relation to clients and stakeholders Critical attention (Media) exposure Navigating risks, uncertainties, dilemmas

Source: Noordegraaf (2020).

social, emphasizing relationships and the professional's primary affiliation to clients. Table 1, which summarizes the key features of the dichotomy, is reproduced below.

To clarify the implications for professional organization research, we begin by looking backward at the origins of connective thinking in these contexts, and then suggest some future directions.

THE WAY THINGS WERE. . .

Any perusal of the foundational literature on the professions and the organizations in which they work reveals the preponderance of protective versus connective constructs. For example, Freidson's (1970: xvii) book on the medical profession begins by stating that 'the profession claims to be the most reliable authority on the nature of the reality it deals with', places an emphasis on professional knowledge, autonomy, division of labor, and self-regulation; and only in the final chapter acknowledges 'economic self-interest' (p. 359) and other limits of professional autonomy. Abbott (1995: 860) begins by asserting that 'social entities come into existence when social actors tie social boundaries together in certain ways. Boundaries come first, then entities'. Even the recent book by Susskind and Susskind (2015) suggests that

contemporary professions are characterized by specialist knowledge, admission based on credentials, regulated activities, and common values—very much in the 'protective' mode.

However, there was significant literature by the 1990s that indicated how the world was changing. These changes are summarized by Brock, Powell and Hinings (1999) at the start of their edited volume, explaining the external drivers of the change:

Markets for professional services have been deregulated, competition is increasing both within and between professions, clients are increasingly sophisticated and demanding, and new technologies open new opportunities for service delivery and encourage the entry of new providers. Consequently, the organizational fields within which professional service firms operate have undergone radical change. Large law and accounting firms compete in increasingly competitive and international arenas. Institutional boundaries between professions, long protected by statute and tradition, have weakened as governments deregulate professional services and firms move to take advantage of new business opportunities (p. 1)

In a similar vein, [Empson et al. \(2015: 15\)](#), in their section entitled ‘Understanding a Phenomenon in Flux’ mention new ownership structures, managerial hierarchies, deregulation, outsourcing, offshoring, transnational jurisdictions, scandals eroding public confidence, undermining of traditional self-regulatory arrangements, and compromised fiduciary duties.

It is against this background that [Noordegraaf \(2020\)](#) notes that the protective structures are diminishing and/or being removed; and thus pushes us all to consider ‘How Connected Professionals Can (Still) Act as Autonomous and Authoritative Experts’. In the following section, we contribute to this literature by looking at some indicators of the changing emphases in selected literature.

A GLANCE AT THE CHANGES

To paint a numerical picture of the changing balance, from protective to connective, let us take a review of relevant constructs in a small sample of literature from the late 1900s and compare it with work in the current millennium. For each construct, we chose three indicative terms, to wit:

Protective: Autonomy, Independent/ce, Protect
Connective: Agency, Connect, Relation/al/ship

For each ‘generation’ of literature, we chose journal articles broadly to represent the field in that era: five papers reflecting the traditional period ([Bucher and Stelling 1969](#); [Cooper et al. 1996](#); [Greenwood 1957](#); [Hall 1968](#); [Wilensky 1964](#)) and another five representative articles published in the last decade (namely [Eyal 2013](#); [Muzio et al. 2013](#); [Anteby et al. 2016](#); [Smets et al. 2017](#); [Adams 2020](#)).

For word searchers, we allowed related words with same root (for example, ‘autonomy’ includes autonomous and autonomously). However, we checked the context of the appearances carefully to exclude unintended meanings, for example, ‘connect’ does not include ‘an example in this connection’ and ‘connections between status and quality’. While ‘independent’ and ‘relationship’ should concern relevant people or organizations, not empirical relationships reported in the study. We excluded words appearing in references and acknowledgements.

The results are shown in [Table 2](#). The general trends are in the directions we would expect—namely, more use of the protective versus the connective terminology for the older articles; more use of the connective versus the protective terms in the newer articles; the protective terms used more in the older than the newer papers; and the connective terms used more in the newer rather than the older articles.

We clearly do not claim any statistical significance to this little exercise. However, it does confirm our intuitive feel—and those of the many authors that have contributed to this discussion over the past year—that scholars are increasingly referring to these connective aspects of the professional organizational field when explaining and interpreting their research findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION RESEARCH

To conclude this exchange, let us consider the implications for those of us researching the organizations in which professionals ply their trades. At the start, we have to recognize the conclusions of our partners in this project who emphasize the general continuity of the protective project. Johan Alvehus is convinced that the classical characteristics of professionalism—including the ‘protective’ aspects—persist; Amalya Oliver and Netta Avnoon expect the protective model to coexist with the connective model ([Alvehus, Avnoon and Oliver 2021](#)). James Faulconbridge cautions against ‘losing sight of the continuity of protection’ ([Faulconbridge, Henriksen and Seabrooke 2021: p. X](#)).

At the same time, all authors reflect the caution emphasized by [Adams et al. \(2020b\)](#) with respect to ideal types. Earlier in this article Mirko Noordegraaf writes that ‘an ideal type is not an ideal’. In their paper, Lasse Henriksen and Len Seabrooke emphasize the symbiotic relationship between the modes, pointing out that the ability to protect stems from the ability to connect ([Faulconbridge, Henriksen and Seabrooke 2021](#)). However, although ideal types are not ideal, unless there is some issue of exclusivity ([Adams et al. 2020a](#)) then we are likely to be missing the point. Alvehus thus draws his discussion of ideal types back to the importance of the ‘professionalism’

Table 2. Some comparative word counts

	Protective				Connective			
	Autonom. . .	Independ. . .	Protect	Total	Agency	Connect	Relational/ship/s	Total
Bucher and Stelling (1969)	5	2	1	8	1	0	4	5
Cooper et al. (1996)	3	0	1	4	0	0	2	2
Greenwood (1957)	0	0	0	0	2	0	9	11
Hall (1968)	32	0	1	33	13	0	6	19
Wilensky (1964)	20	5	11	36	2	2	2	6
Total	60	7	14	81	18	2	23	43
Adams (2020)	9	0	5	14	0	5	1	6
Anteby et al. (2016)	7	6	1	14	5	8	35	48
Eyal (2013)	12	0	1	13	0	4	9	13
Muzio et al. (2013)	2	0	0	2	28	13	2	43
Smets et al. (2017)	6	2	5	13	1	0	4	5
Total	36	8	12	56	34	30	51	115

construct—indeed (‘It’s complicated’, but) we are interested in professionalism to the extent that it a meaningful societal construct (Alvehus, Avnoon and Oliver 2021).

Considering future directions, we adopt the five interconnected topics used by Brock, Leblebici and Muzio (2014) in *JPO*’s initial editorial essay, and briefly consider relevant research developments in each of these areas:

Organizational models and structures

Connectivity is clearly a crucial organizational construct, and recent literature in professional firms has demonstrated the importance of organizational processes to enable human communication and collaboration. For example, Cromwell and Gardner (2020) study how collaboration (between clients and professionals) may be related to innovation. Salvoldi and Brock (2019) survey international law firm networks, and present a typology of network mechanisms that connect the relevant actors. In this issue, Henriksen and Seabrooke underscore the symbiotic relationship between network modes and roles, explaining how the ability to connect actually underscores the ability to protect (Faulconbridge, Henriksen and Seabrooke 2021). We envisage future work emphasizing the importance of organizational aspects of connectivity in professional contexts.

Micro-organizational issues

Connectedness of individuals is clearly a significant part of professional work and professional life. Thus, the recent paper on boundaries in the legal profession by Francis (2020) emphasized the importance of the connectivity lens in understanding contemporary professionalism, specifically influencing claims of expertise. Smets, et al. (2017) consider ‘changing career expectations and work–life preferences’ as one of the dominant themes for future professional firm research. The recent Covid pandemic significantly hastened trends toward working from home and other family-friendly policies, even in traditional professionalized settings (Hoff 2021). We thus call for research on how professionals maintain (or perhaps bolster) connectivity with less face-to-face interactions in traditional professional settings.

Diversity, inclusion and the professions

Recent work has also highlighted the relevance of connective constructs in our understanding of diversity and inclusion in professionalized settings. Brady (2018) studies and suggests networks of expertise as fundamental to a feminist sociology of expertise. Gorman (2015) shows how social connections are important in professionals’ career advancement, partly explaining women’s lower likelihood of promotion. Ballakrishnen’s (2017) study of elite Indian lawyers includes the observation that a ‘client’s

dependence on quality that was ‘responsive’, capable of ‘connection’, and that had a ‘personal touch’ are all gendered descriptions of work, but their positive valorization highlights one more reason women were privileged in law firms. . .’ (p. 336). *JPO* currently has a call for a special issue on diversity and inclusion (<https://academic.oup.com/jpo/pages/call-for-papers-diversity>) and we very much look forward to improving not only our understanding of diversity and inclusion, but also to outcomes—that is, improved diversity and inclusion in professional organizations.

New/emerging professions and organization

While the connective aspects of professional work emerge and rival the protective aspects, so does research reflect the emergence of new professionalized fields. These occupations are enabled by the macro-trends—such as deregulation and new technology—which simultaneously weaken protective and enable connective tendencies. Thus, for example, [Boussard \(2018\)](#) explains the professional closure regimes and relevant boundary work surrounding the mergers and acquisitions specialists. Two recent *JPO* papers ([Nicklich, Braun and Fortwengel 2021](#) ; [Sabini and Paton, 2021](#)) investigate the institutional enablers of project management. Another pair of recent *JPO* papers discuss the professionalization of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ ([Dudau, Kominis and Brunetto 2021](#); [Jacobsson, Wallinder and Seing 2021](#)). We would like to encourage other researchers working with emerging connective occupations to publish their work in *JPO*.

Societal issues: professions and professional organization in the broader political economy

As researchers we are blessed: On the one hand, the foundations of our field of study emphasize important societal functions. Professionals claim to need to protect themselves to protect consumers, clients, patients, workers, and so on. On the other hand—as emphasized in the above paragraph—we tend to champion reformulation and innovation toward new professionalized areas. [Bierman et al \(2019\)](#) take up this theme, noting deterioration of social capital in parallel to difficulties in regulating and gatekeeping, and professional oversight. [Brès, et al. \(2019\)](#) focus

on corporate social responsibility, encouraging us to rethink the role of professional expertise in collaboration between networks of stakeholders.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

JPO strives to continue hosting cutting edge scholarship that is sensitive to paradigmatic shifts in our world. Thus, we are grateful to all the colleagues that have contributed to this forum over the past year—and generally encourage scholars to consider *JPO* as the venue for ongoing work that continues this important stream of work.

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