Introduction: The importance of appreciating the pieces of professionalism

We need to know about professions. We need to know about their distinguishing features and how they function in society, because professions are social constructs that influence our work and personal lives. It is likely that few people probably stop to think about them but we ought to be conscious of them because of the general effect they have on politics, economics, and social behaviour.

This article briefly describes the contemporary history of professions in simple structural terms, and continues with a general description of professions as a social construct. A more functionalist approach to analyzing professions would attempt to understand how professions operate in the social order, and to describe their relationships to clients and other professionals. While these functions and relationships are important, they are not the focus of this article. Instead, the theoretical framework employed here characterizes professions in terms of their common components. These components and the related process of professionalisation, which indicates how occupations attempt to move towards "professional" status, are featured. Following an overview of each component, some consideration is given to the current CIP context, and to how professional planning in Canada might begin to be rated or, perhaps more realistically, how its professional status might be debated.

A Brief Contemporary History of Professions

The earliest entrenched professions – namely, medicine, law and education/theology – owe their origins to two organizations of medieval Europe: the university (which was tied to the church) and the guild. Across the eighteenth century, the concept of associations took hold in the cities of Europe. This led to the creation of formal associations based on social aspects and on the performance of specialized work (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933, the major source of references for this section). Generally, they were associations of merchants, tradesmen and "the learned" who shared common interests and goals.

It soon became the custom that anyone who practiced a craft required a formal license, and anyone who taught others similarly required some sort of university recognition. Other common vocations also existed, but these were not perceived to possess particularly specialized techniques, and therefore offered no incentive to their practitioners to form associations.

Throughout the eighteenth century, professions were described first and foremost as "gentlemen's occupations". Professional men met periodically to form "dining clubs", which most often involved social events mixed with technical discussions of occupational problems. As science gained greater acceptance during the Industrial Revolution, new professions emerged which were founded on science (e.g., engineering, dentistry, veterinary medicine, surgical sub-specialties, and pharmacology). Professional practice at that time was based either on scientific technique or on intellectual knowledge.

The study of certain, often specialized, disciplines continued to be promoted in dining clubs. Admission to these clubs was limited to those who could show competence in a particular discipline, and prestige was soon attached to membership. The title of "professional" indicated that an individual had acquired a certain degree of competence in his own sphere; a "title" was the competent professional's way of being distinguished from other practitioners. Supposedly, the public could also distinguish between competent and incompetent practitioners based on these titles. However, no one could yet distinguish between honourable and dishonourable members of a profession. Hence, many professional organizations introduced codes of ethics in an attempt to address this concern.

More recently, during the 1960s, there was a movement against any symbol of authority, coupled with a movement against the nature of work in capitalist society. Professions were regarded as part of that "authority". Thus, instead of being extolled as altruistic and liberalizing, they were critically scrutinized as part of the structure of privilege and social mobility. Freidson (1973) suggests that occupations sought a secure and privileged place in the economy of countries that had a laissez-faire philosophy. This "right to practice" was established on state support and provided exclusionary shelter in the open-market. Researchers began to study the components of professions from a theoretical perspective, and later focused on the influence that professions had on politics and economics, specifically regarding markets, class systems and states.

Components of Professions

Even though there are different approaches to studying professions, many writers adopt a set of basic components that differentiate professions from other occupations. In 1957, Ernest Greenwood wrote a seminal article about the components of professions, entitled Attributes of a Profession. Writers have since used slight variations on Greenwood's list, and seem to "pick and choose" from these components, which Greenwood thought made up the ideal profession. According to Greenwood, who is supported by the work of Vollmer and Mills (1966, 10), all professions, and thus all professionals, have:

- a basis of systematic theory;
- authority, recognized by the clientele of the professional group and exercised upon its own members;
- broad community sanction and approval for this autonomy;
- a code of ethics regulating relations between professional persons, clients, and other colleagues; and
- a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations and a process of socialisation.

The most distinguishing element of a profession is knowledge acquired "from within a specific and unique theoretical discipline as a result of intellectual training". Knowledge is acquired both formally and informally throughout the professional development process. Professionals have different and more detailed knowledge in their disciplines than does the public. This is what distinguishes the professional from the layperson. Some writers suggest that some so-called professionals have tried to create a "body of theory" in order to justify the existence of their supposed professions. Others ask if there really is a body of knowledge that is solely known and used by one profession. Moore (1970) adds that, with increased technology and the codification and standardization of information, a given profession no longer has exclusive ownership of a body of knowledge.

So, what's a profession?
And how does CIP-style planning rate?

by Nancy Marshall, MCIP

Figure 1. The Professionalisation Continuum

OCCUPATIONS ----- PROFESSIONS

Knowledge and Theory

Specific to a Discipline

A profession's underlying body of theory is a system of abstract propositions that describe in general terms the classes of phenomena comprising the profession's focus of interest. ... Preparation for a profession, therefore, involves considerable preoccupation with systematic theory, a feature virtually absent in the training of the non-professional.

Greenwood (1966, 11)

Some writers suggest there is one continuum of professionalisation, on which professions and occupations are polarized according to the degree to which the above components are apparent (see Figure 1). As Vollmer and Mills write, "occupations may be placed somewhere on a continuum between the ideal-type 'professions', at the one end and completely unorganized occupational categories, or 'non-professions', at the other end" (1966, 2)

However, my own research and experience leads me to contend that each component of a profession has its own separate continuum, which, when combined with others, provides a more instructive framework, especially for the purposes of more refined evaluation or "rating". The components, situated along parallel continua, share the endpoints that distinguish a fully-evolved profession from an unorganized occupation (see Figure 2).

The following section presents a brief discussion of each of these components and their interconnectedness, and concludes with some thoughts about each component in terms of the perceived current state of the planning profession in Canada.

Figure 1. The Professionalisation Continuum and its Components

OCCUPATIONS ----- PROFESSIONS

Knowledge and Theory

Specific to a Discipline

Community
Sanction

Authority

Code of Ethics

Socialisation
and Culture

Source: Marshall 1994

Note: The order of these components is not a hierarchy but a series of continua.
Do planners have knowledge or are they merely planners? Even though CIP has adopted a formal definition of planning, there is often disagreement amongst individual members and amongst provincial affiliates about what planning is and what it is not, and about what types of “professional experience” should be accepted or rejected when granting membership in the professional organization. The debate continues about what planning is, let alone what constitutes its “unique” theory or knowledge. Planning theories come and go like fashion. As Sanderson suggests in Towards Cosmopolis, “planning needs to identify the specificity of its domain in such a way as not to be declared redundant every decade” (1998, 222) – if that is possible.

Community Sanctions

Every profession strives to persuade the community to sanction its authority within certain spheres by conferring upon the profession a series of powers and privileges.

Greenwood (1966, 13)

This component has several subcomponents, which are intertwined with other components. Education and training, legal right to titles and practice, and general community “good” are all subcomponents of community sanctions.

Education and Training: Cuthbert believes that a profession built around any discipline has never been a necessary part of any society, ancient or contemporary. He contends that a profession is an “arbitrary construct that derives power from its incorporation with two key state enterprises, namely the law and tertiary education” (1997, 216). In contrast, Jackson (1970) suggests it is universities and those accredited professionals who are also educators that perpetuate the characteristic knowledge of professions and thus perpetuate the status of professions.

Right to Title and Practice: As Cuthbert (1997) has pointed out, professions often gain power from tertiary education and the legal system. Thus, it is through legal means that professions gain the “right to title and practice” which comes when “the profession persuades the community to institute on its behalf a licensing system for screening those qualified to practice the professional skill” (Greenwood 1966, 13).

Relevance to Basic Social Values and Community “Good”: Professionals were initially thought to be “called” to their profession, with their foremost concern being the welfare of their clients and, hence, the public interest. In more recent times, many believe these altruistic traits have been undermined by self-interest, and that professionals have become consumed by power, money, influence and status. As Illich (1977, 15) writes, professions “dominate the creation, adjudication and implementation of needs [and] are a new kind of cartel” that keeps the demand for and price of a service high. Less cynical writers suggest that the influence of a profession depends on the existence of specific knowledge and the way in which it is organized to muster support from officials and the general public (both of which give professionals their special status).

The planning profession in Canada has been granted certain sanctions related to education and training, as well as the legal right to title and practice. However, these sanctions differ greatly amongst provincial affiliates. For example, the various accreditation processes use different criteria to evaluate members or tertiary education institutions. Moreover, the accreditation processes are implemented in different ways. Only some provincial affiliates have managed to persuade the state to grant accredited planners (in that jurisdiction) a legal professional designation for the right to title and practice. The Ontario Professional Planning Institute (OPPI) granting of the Registered Professional Planner (RPP) is seen by many as a great achievement. Why then, has that legal status not been granted to all members of the profession?

Professional Authority, Autonomy and Control

The professional’s authority, however, is not limitless; its function is confined to those specific spheres within which the profession has been educated.

Greenwood (1966, 13)

Each profession has authority that grants its members autonomy and control over their professional organization, including control over the organization’s information, research being conducted under its auspices, membership, theoretical knowledge (imparted through education) and right to title and practice. In part, this involves the control of knowledge and a “claiming” of the theories and techniques that the profession identifies as its area of expertise or exclusive body of knowledge. The trait of autonomy also includes the ability of members of a profession to control membership in the profession. No professional association is without the “power to exclude” members.

As Reg Lang succinctly states in his article in this edition of Plan Canada, “the planning profession in Canada has a diffuse body of knowledge, a diffuse body of theory around which there is little consensus or apparent interest, and weak disciplinary processes”. The profession is struggling to exert its authority and to be autonomous. CIP has thus far operated with a “closed-organization” corporate membership policy, eliminating the opportunity for individuals who do not have a university degree to obtain membership in the organization (although they may have training in planning as technicians). However, CIP will grant membership to individuals with either a “related university degree” or an “unrelated degree” providing they also have additional “responsible professional planning experience” (CIP 1994a). From this, one can only assume that it is not the relevant experience that is important but rather the university degree, any university degree, or that university degree, that is vaguely related to planning.

Codes of Ethics

While the specifics of their ethical codes vary among the professions, the essentials are uniform. These may be described in terms of client-professional and colleague-colleague relations.

Greenwood (1966, 15)

Originally, codes of ethics were not required by professional associations; they were thought to be unnecessary to the general public. However, for those practitioners who did not have “the lineage of the learned”, codes of ethics became more important (Moore 1970).

As Goode (1957) suggests, codes of ethics define appropriate professional behaviour with respect to individual clients, the larger community, fellow practitioners and unauthorized practitioners. Because “true” professionals hold a monopoly over their services and clients, a professional’s influence on the public and privileges might be abused. Thus, “through its ethical code, the profession’s commitment to the social welfare becomes a matter of public record, thereby insuring for itself the continued confidence of the community” (Greenwood 1966, 14). It is this confidence, in the form of community sanction, that allows a profession to maintain its monopoly.

CIP has adopted a Statement of Values and a Code of Professional Conduct. While together these could be seen as a code of ethics, the professional organization rarely, if ever, relies on them to monitor professional behaviour. What effect do these statements really have? Do planners use them, refer to them, or alter their behaviour because colleagues, although many, often, do not know “the language”.

Communitysanctionisvast, and CIP has, to its credit, ensured that an affiliate operates in every region of the country. In this respect, it offers a formal network of colleagues, although many members do not take advantage of it. However, no one could claim that planners have their own language (unless we count such mumbling as, “I’m an MCIP, RPP – affiliated with OPPI – working on a DVP for an RM-4 before the DAB”). Planning institute members do not use symbols or letters other than those associated with the two highest rungs of the ladder of membership status: namely, student member, provincial member, professional member, and fellow (FCIP). There are also “non-corporate” membership classes: specifically, honorary member and public associate (CIP 1994b).

Some Final Thoughts

Why are a number of vocational groups, including planners, so desperate to call their occupation a profession? I would contend that if we look out from the comparatively hard and fast discipline of planning while keeping the “components of professions” in mind, we find a group of certain planning practitioners and educators – especially those “institutionalized” in CIP – who kept “professionalize”. Are those who want professional status fearful of being associated with a mere “trade”? Do they covet the seeming cachet that is attached to the traditionally recognized professions of medicine, law and
engineering? Does the suggestion that planning is at least on its way to becoming a full "profession" really make a difference, if actual planning practice is the same regardless of whether or not we call ourselves a profession, and whether or not we associate ourselves with a professional institute?

In the Canadian context, planners, as a vocational group acting through their professional association—most often their provincial affiliate—are, based on this review, actively striving to attain each of the professional components previously discussed. As planners try to identify and agree on their intellectual domain, as affiliates seek formal sanction by winning provincial rights to title and practice, as more planners are socialised through accredited planning courses and efforts by CIP, and as some (less than acceptable) individuals are refused entry into "the club", we see the vocation of planning slowly inching along towards recognition as a full profession. But we also see more and more practitioners who, whether formally trained as planners or not, are working in the field of planning and calling themselves planners. Ultimately, does it really make a difference if planners are socially endorsed as "true professionals" or not? The debate continues.

References

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Summary
Popular and theoretical descriptions of professions are quite different. Professions really started to take hold in Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the formation of guilds and associations. These started out as exclusive groups, but, with the Industrial Revolution, changes came to society and to the professions within it: professional associations became formally organized, and were soon studied as bodies that were distinct from other occupations.

Theoretically, the component parts of a profession are commonly defined as: (1) knowledge and theory specific to a discipline; (2) community sanctions; (3) professional authority, autonomy and control; (4) codes of ethics; and (5) socialisation and the development of a professional culture. In contemporary times, many occupational groups have attempted to become recognized as professions, and a number have achieved this popular status. A theoretical definition, though, continues to limit the application of the label "profession" to relatively few vocations. Nevertheless, many Canadian planners continue their quest for such public acknowledgment.

Résumé
La définition populaire des professions libérales est très différente de leur définition théorique. Les professions libérales ont fait leur apparition au cours des 11ème et 12ème siècles en Europe avec la formation de guildes et d'associations. Elles débuteaient sous forme de groupes très fermés, mais avec la révolution industrielle, des changements ont bouleversé la société et du même coup le monde professionnel. Les associations professionnelles devinrent des organismes officiels et ne tardèrent pas à faire l'objet d'études en tant que corporations distinctes des autres activités.

En théorie, on peut énumérer les parties constitutantes d'une profession libérale de la façon suivante : (1) connaissance pratique et théorique particulière à une discipline ; (2) reconnaissance de la collectivité ; (3) maîtrise, autonomie et contrôle ; (4) codes d'éthique et (5) socialisation et développement d'une culture professionnelle. À notre époque, de nombreux groupes d'activités ont cherché à être reconnus en tant que profession libérale et certains d'entre eux y sont parvenus. Toutefois, l'une des conditions théoriques empêche encore un nombre relativement restreint de métiers d'obtenir cette appellation.

Quoi qu'il en soit, les urbanistes canadiens continuent nombreux à rechercher ce statut social et la reconnaissance de public.