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Pamela S. Tolbert
Cornell University, pst3@cornell.edu

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[Review of the book *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*]

Abstract
[Excerpt] In *The System of Professions*, Abbott directly confronts these important and long-neglected issues in an original and highly thought-provoking approach to the analysis of professions. Focusing on the dynamics through which occupations define their jurisdiction, or the right to control the provision of particular services and activities, this approach draws attention to one of the most critical determinants of jurisdiction, interprofessional competition. Based on an astoundingly wide, cross-cultural knowledge of the histories of a variety of occupations, Abbott provides a rich and complex analysis of the nature of relationships among professional occupations and the forces that shape these relationships over time.

Keywords
professions, jurisdiction, competition, relationships

Comments
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The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor.
Andrew Abbott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. 435 pp. $49.94, cloth; $19.95, paper.

Studies of professions have traditionally been motivated by an interest in explaining the dominant position of a few occupational groups (notably law and medicine) in the social stratification system. Although this concern is not always made explicit, it is reflected in the focal questions that have guided the vast majority of theoretical analyses of professions: What characteristics distinguish professions from other occupa-

tions, and how are these characteristics related to the economic and social power that is accorded professional occupations? Although work on these questions has generated a fair number of academic debates and yielded some interesting insights into the structures and relationships that characterize contemporary professions, it rests on a fundamentally static view of the occupational system, one that has deflected attention away from issues of how occupations achieve dominance in a system and how that dominance is maintained or altered over time.

In *The System of Professions,* Abbott directly confronts these important and long-neglected issues in an original and highly thought-provoking approach to the analysis of professions. Focusing on the dynamics through which occupations define their jurisdiction, or the right to control the provision of particular services and activities, this approach draws attention to one of the most critical determinants of jurisdiction, interprofessional competition. Based on an astoundingly wide, cross-cultural knowledge of the histories of a variety of occupations, Abbott provides a rich and complex analysis of the nature of relationships among professional occupations and the forces that shape these relationships over time.

The core ideas that underpin Abbott's approach are provided in the introductory chapter, containing a cogent review and critique of previously developed theoretical approaches to the analysis of professional occupations. He notes a number of key (though typically implicit) assumptions that characterize earlier approaches and the way in which the perspective and analyses presented in this book reflect precisely the opposite set of assumptions. While most studies treat professionalization (or deprofessionalization) of occupations as a unidirectional process, here it is assumed to be multidirectional; some parts of an occupation may become routinized and cast off, while others may become elaborated and defined as the core of the profession. In line with this, Abbott's approach assumes that analysis of the tasks or work activities of occupations is the key to understanding changes in professionalization. This contrasts with traditional approaches that have largely ignored work content, assuming social structures and cultural claims to be the central aspects of professions. A third assumption is that an occupation's ability to assume exclusive control of work activities depends largely on interprofessional competition; thus, the assumption that professionalizing occupations can be studied in isolation from other occupations is rejected. His approach directly focuses on differentiation within professions as a source of occupational change over time, suggesting that the common simplifying assumption of internal homogeneity is problematic. And finally, by drawing attention to major shifts that may occur over time in a system of occupations, his analysis demands examination of the particular historical context of interprofessional jurisdictional disputes in understanding the process of professionalization; thus, the conventional assumption that the process is not historically timebound is also called into question.

Also in sharp contrast to traditional studies of professions that typically devote considerable time and energy to the task of developing a precise definition of "profession," Abbott de-

fines the concept loosely, as "exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases" (p. 8). The critical, distinguishing characteristic of professional occupations, from this perspective, is the possession of a body of abstract knowledge on which the occupation bases its claims for the exclusive right to control specific work activities.

Given these general orienting assumptions and definition, the book focuses on specifying the general conditions and sources of jurisdictional changes within a system of professions. It is organized into three major sections. The first deals with the processes and requirements of the effective establishment and maintenance of jurisdictional claims by occupations. Separate chapters consider the general nature of the tasks that professions claim responsibility for carrying out and how these tasks affect the viability of claims, the structures through which jurisdictional claims are advanced, judged, and settled, the factors that set interprofessional competition for jurisdiction in motion, as well as historically and culturally varying characteristics of occupational systems that affect the extent of such competition.

The second section takes an existing system of occupational relations as its frame of reference and examines sources of change in the system. These sources include processes of differentiation within occupations that can affect interoccupational power relations, societal-level changes in technology and organizations that create and destroy new activities over which professions may vie for control, and cultural changes that affect the way in which jurisdictional claims are advanced and legitimated. Separate chapters are devoted to a thorough examination of each of these sources.

The third and final section applies and illustrates ideas developed in the preceding chapters in three case studies of what could be called "professional fields"—general areas of work over which competing occupations claim domain. The first study deals with the emergence and evolution of "information professions," those involving the cataloguing, retrieval, and decisions about the use of codified knowledge or information. The second study focuses more narrowly on the legal profession, comparing the development of the profession in Britain and the U.S., while the third study examines competition among occupations involved in the provision of psychological and emotional counseling services to individuals.

This is a brilliant and intellectually stimulating exposition of a major new approach to studies of professions. By focusing on the problem of jurisdictional negotiations among occupations, it provides a much broader, more dynamic framework for answering the traditional questions of how and why some occupations achieve economic and social dominance in society. More importantly, it points up a number of important theoretical questions that have been neglected in previous work: Under what conditions will members of an occupation mobilize to claim occupational control over some specified set of work activities? What factors affect the strategies that are used in pursuing such claims? And what factors affect the success or failure of this pursuit?

Perhaps ironically, one of the major metatheoretical issues

that the book implicitly raises concerns the ultimate utility of differentiating professions from other occupations. As noted, Abbott attempts to draw a boundary around professional occupations in terms of the use of abstract knowledge to legitimate claims to control of work activities. But with very few exceptions, the work of most occupations does potentially or in fact rest on *some* type of abstract knowledge, and, as Abbott recognizes, the abstract knowledge on which an occupation bases its claims to professional status may be only tenuously related to the actual work activities of its members. A focus on professions, implying qualitative distinctions among occupational groups, obviates important initial questions about the conditions under which occupational groups are likely to develop and claim an abstract body of knowledge as the basis of their work. Think, for example, of the comparison of accountants and clerical workers. While the tasks of both groups involve organizational record-keeping responsibilities, the former group has managed to construct a general, more or less abstract knowledge base on which professional status is claimed; the latter has not.

The question of the utility of focusing on professions does not, however, detract at all from Abbott's analysis. Indeed, the analysis largely anticipates this issue: It is easy to insert "occupation" for "profession" in the writing and little is lost. As Abbott observes (p. 317), "The system approach offers a way of thinking about divisions of labor in general." Thus, the book should be, and is likely to become, required reading for anyone interested in understanding the relationship between occupations and organizations and, more generally, the dynamics of occupational change and influence in society.

Pamela S. Tolbert
Assistant Professor
School of Industrial and Labor Relations
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853