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

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**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

**Disciplines**

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**Comments**

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book is an important reading for researchers interested in the science of administration.

Zur Shapira
Visiting Scholar
Russell Sage Foundation
112 E. 64th Street
New York, NY 10021
and
Department of Management
Stern School of Business
New York University
New York, NY 10003

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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 eco-
nomic and social power that is accorded professional
occupations? Although work on these questions has gener-
ated a fair number of academic debates and yielded some in-
teresting insights into the structures and relationships that
characterize contemporary professions, it rests on a funda-
mentally 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 partic-
ular services and activities, this approach draws attention to
one of the most critical determinants of jurisdiction, interpro-
fessional 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 professionaliza-
tion (or deprofessionalization) of occupations as a unidirec-
tional 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 occu-
pations is the key to understanding changes in professionali-
zation. 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 ex-
clusive control of work activities depends largely on interpro-
fessional 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 occupa-
tional change over time, suggesting that the common simpli-
fying 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 interprofes-
sional 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

Women, Work and Divorce.

Women, Work, and Divorce, an intriguing book on an important topic, addresses two issues, the first of general interest to both scholars and the general public, the second of special concern to those who study labor supply and demand. First, the book explores the economic consequences of divorce for women and, more generally, how women balance work and family issues. Second, the research presented informs us about the relative merits of structural and individualist explanations of labor markets.

The value of the book stems from several sources. First, the author used data and analytical procedures that advance the field. Second, he extended previous schemes used to categorize the marital status of women. Third, he compared predictions from two different theoretical bases.

The method used to study these issues is extremely pow-