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## Professional Associations or Unions? A Comparative Look

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### ABSTRACT

THE ARTICLE DISCUSSES PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS and unions in terms of their culture, motives for collective action, and the values which they ultimately promote. The author concludes that it is up to a professional occupation to define the degree of difference between these two types of organizations.

### INTRODUCTION

Looking at the white collar working class, Mills (1951) explains that, before the twentieth century, American life was characterized by a decentralized economic life, directed predominately by the interests of private ownership. The two primary economic forces which guided the capitalistic system of the country by the end of the nineteenth century were the independent farmer and the small businessman. At that time, in their small isolated world, these two working groups of men were separate economic entities struggling for survival and improvement of individual property.

With the coming of the twentieth century, society experienced a dramatic change. Previously, small enterprises began merging into big corporations, while government, faced with new tasks, became much more elaborate and complex. The eventual result of this change was the removal of the members of the old middle class from their isolated worlds and into a bureaucratic and complex system in which occupation instead of property became the main source of income. The American middle

class, composed now mainly of white-collar workers, found itself in a centralized economic system in which people's interaction and interdependence were central and brought a stronger awareness of each other (Mills, 1951).

According to Sherif and Sherif (1969), the presence of organized groups is a consequence of interacting individuals "who possess a set of values or norms of their own regulating their behavior, at least in matters of consequence to the group" (p. 131). In the case of white-collar workers, group organization often took the form of either professional associations or unions, both of them representing the special interests and objectives of this class of employees. Although both labor unions and professional societies already existed in the nineteenth century, it was in the last hundred years when both of them managed to successfully attract a large number of individuals and legitimize themselves as a means to pursue the interests of their membership.

According to Haug and Sussman (1973): "Unionization and professionalization are two processes by which members of an occupation seek to achieve collective upward mobility" (p. 89). This is analogous, the authors explain, to an individual's striving to improve his pay, working conditions, autonomy, and status, the only difference being that, whereas individual efforts can be easily hindered, collective efforts are often seen as a more effective way of dealing with similar issues. However, although labor unions and professional associations offer an alternative in improving a profession's status, they are often seen as antithetical especially when it comes to their culture, motives for joined action, and the particular values they ultimately promulgate.

### A CULTURE OF INTEGRATION AND CONFLICT

According to Parsons (1969), associations join different social institutions that would otherwise threaten the integrity of modern society if each individual pursued his own self interest. Functionalism, the theory Parsons subscribes to, holds that associations have the ability to bring order by providing a consensual normative structure—i.e., agreed-upon values—which direct the behavior of individuals according to what is defined as proper, legal, or acceptable by the rest of the community. Referring specifically to what they called occupational community, Van Maanen and Barley (1984) described it as "a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from the work; [and] who share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives" (p. 287).

Professional associations ascribe to a culture of consensual collective efforts to preserve a profession's unified front. As Galaskiewicz (1985) notes, "one of the latent functions of professional associations is to put people together in committees, panels, task forces, and study groups who

might not otherwise be attracted to one another based on their background characteristics alone" (p. 640). A consequence of such interactions is the establishment of a unified culture for the profession, the institutionalization of professional codes of conduct, establishment of educational and performance standards, and the diffusion and incorporation of change and innovation within the profession. In the library field, for example, professional associations have provided a shared sense of professional identity just as an increasing number of subspecialties and variety of work settings have emerged.

Although integration has been credited as one of the main characteristics of the professional association's culture, labor unions have often been charged with quite the opposite. The presence of union groups is often treated as the result of conflict of interests between management and workers. The charge has repeatedly been made that such organizations split the profession, dissociating people and institutions.

Galaskiewicz (1985) explains that, particularly in times of uncertainty, "professionals will seek out those with whom they can communicate easily, even if this means that they systematically segregate themselves from a subset of other actors in the group" (p. 640). White-collar labor unions sprang up as a reaction to a search for occupational justice and improvement of working conditions among the rank-and-file of a profession who differentiated themselves from management even within the same occupation. Moreover, interest groups such as unions do not only represent the interests and values of their members, but they also make demands against the status quo of the authorities and cultivate among their membership a feeling of "us" against "them."

Despite charges that unions are the cause of segregation and hostility in a profession, conflict of interests may be inevitable even within a profession that tries hard to keep its unity. Although among professionals the differentiation between management and rank-and-file is not quite as clear as among blue-collar workers, it still exists despite similarities in training and occupational identity. Managerial employees in professional institutions are still the ones who control the allocation of resources such as salaries, "but more important for work, differential resources to the various units of the organization, resources of supporting staff, physical space, equipment, and the like" (Freidson, 1987, p. 3). Rank-and-file professionals may provide their input, but it is the administration that ultimately makes allocation decisions and determines what work is to be done and how it is to be done. This differentiation in power implies that managerial employees may support interests and goals which could be different from those of rank-and-file practitioners and, as a consequence, it becomes a frequent cause of friction between these two classes of professional employees (Freidson, 1986).

Dahrendorf's (1959) theory of conflict explains that authority relations, independent of the personality of people involved, are the cause of potential clashes of interest between those with decision-making power and those who are subject to it. Under certain conditions, these clashes generate the formation of interest groups, such as unions, which attempt to modify the characteristics of this relationship and improve the status of their membership. Specifically, the transformation of a collectivity of individuals to an interest group is, for Dahrendorf, possible only under certain conditions: (1) "technical conditions," such as the presence of leadership as well as ideology for the articulation of the group's interest; (2) "political conditions," or the political permissibility for group organization (in the case of unions, this implies, for instance, state laws allowing collective bargaining); and (3) "social conditions," that is, the degree of communication between the members of a potential interest group.

The ultimate function of conflict is change and, as Dahrendorf (1959) believes, integration. As he explains, "we cannot conceive of society, unless we realize the dialectics of stability and change, integration and conflict, function and motive force, consensus and coercion" (p. 163). Taking this perspective, one may argue that the labor movement provides an alternative approach to integration within a profession, one which recognizes differences based on power relations and incorporates changes by recognizing the special interests of rank-and-file and their need to improve their status. Despite the fact that conflict is often perceived as harmful to a relationship, it may actually stabilize it by providing an opportunity for negotiations. As Simmel (1955) argues: "Conflict is designed to resolve divergent dualisms; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity.... [and resolve] the tension between contrasts" (p. 13).

Research has provided support that the fears about the effect of unionization on the employees' loyalty to management are not substantiated. According to Dean (1954), some people believe that, because of the conflict of interest between rank-and-file and management, unionized workers tend to identify less with the employing organization. These ideas have been challenged repeatedly by research evidence which supports that "dual allegiance" to the union and management is indeed possible (for example, see Rose, 1952; Dean, 1954; Stagner, 1954; Purcell, 1960; Fukami & Larson, 1982; Angle & Perry, 1986; Martin, 1981; Gallagher, 1984; Hovekamp, 1994a). A recent study among unionized librarians in research institutions revealed that, although union presence had a statistically significant negative relation to overall organizational loyalty, union commitment was positively related to organizational commitment. This finding suggested that professionals who view unions as a positive presence to their welfare may also use them as an outlet to resolve their negative feelings and, as a result, strengthen their ties with management (Hovekamp, 1994a).<sup>1</sup>

Both professional associations and unions have the ability to help a profession communicate and stay cohesive by recognizing both commonalities and differences. Whereas associations bring the profession outside the arena of individual institutions and work environments and unite it on the basis of common knowledge and expertise, unionization acknowledges distinctions in power and interests as these are determined by the position each professional occupies in his work organization. Consequently, one may approach these two interest groups as an opportunity for integration in a professional community which can take advantage of both its similarities and differences to promote internal unity.

### MOTIVES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

According to popular opinion, the reasons why professionals choose to join professional associations are different from those for joining a union. On the one hand, the goals of professional associations presumably reflect an emphasis on public goods. In the library field, these are represented by issues such as access to information, intellectual freedom, copyright rights, literacy, and technology awareness and advancement. Professional issues, such as the improvement of the occupation's standards and expertise, are also central concerns. Furthermore, as Alexander (1980) notes, "the professional association lays claim first and foremost to autonomy and independence on the job" (p. 477). Unions, on the other hand, are assumed to be mainly interested in the membership's private benefits, mainly economic, and perpetuate an impression for professional employees as dependent workers with limited control over their jobs.

In his classic book *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson (1965) was among the first sociologists to argue that the pursuit of the public good is not a strong enough motivator to draw an individual to an interest group. By public good, Olson meant benefits that are available to everyone, regardless of their membership in an interest group. Private and material benefits, on the other hand, he said, are essential in attracting members and keeping their commitment to their group organization.

Although the primacy of the public good and the service ideal are focal points in motivating professionals to pool their resources, professional associations often have to appeal to the individual's interest in private benefits by providing exclusive services ranging from placement services to dissemination of information through journals, newsletters, or conferences. A recent study among university librarians in California provided empirical evidence that indeed personal interests are a strong motivator for joining professional associations. Based on the results of a survey, it was found that a large number of respondents indicated that some of the most important reasons for joining and participating in pro-

professional associations included networking with others in the profession, subscription to journals which accompany membership, having an opportunity for personal input in setting the goals of the profession, and also the fact that membership can play an important role in job reappointment and promotion (Anderson et al., 1992).

The rhetoric of "service" and "standards" that professional associations use to attract their members has also been under attack as "potentially elitist," compelling the professional to identify more with a "community of one's peers" rather than the client and his actual concerns (Haug & Sussman, 1973, pp. 91-92). Referring specifically to library professionals, Estabrook (1981) commented: "The more we seek to establish our expertise, the more we become resistant to community control" (p. 126). Alexander (1980) adds to these charges by characterizing the language of service and public good as pretentious and as obscuring the professionals' desire for higher economic gain:

At an ideal level, professionals stress the primacy of the public good, whereas unions stress the primacy of private benefit. However, by definition, professionals are not as immune to financial lure as their rhetoric of service might imply. In fact, financial success and high prestige are inevitable and necessary requisites of full-fledged professional status. Though generally masked in professional rhetoric, substantial financial gain is indispensable to assure professional status. (p. 477)

Unions are indeed quite open in pursuing the private financial concerns of their membership. One of the main forces in union activity is improving salaries, benefits, hours, and working conditions, and for that unions are continuously engaged in "an open dialogue of rights, demands, grievances, needs, and privileges" (Haug & Sussman, 1973, p. 97). However, professional associations also strive for their membership's upward mobility and economic rewards; instead of presenting this as a clear agenda item, they try to accomplish their goal indirectly by attempting to improve the image of the profession and persuade the public of how valuable and indispensable are the knowledge and special skills of the practitioners. In other words, whereas unions tend to be more specific and immediate in the pursuit of the members' private goals, a professional association "deals more at the level of broad public relations" (Alexander, 1980, p. 478).

The opportunity to network and have free access to information in a community of colleagues has attracted a lot of membership to professional associations. As Galaskiewicz (1985) notes, approaching professional groups as networks "is appealing, because professionals supposedly have considerable work autonomy and are well insulated from bureaucratic controls" (p. 639). Despite a profession's desire to see itself depending on professional networks rather than on bureaucratic organi-

zations, however, there is quite strong evidence that the professional worker is not as autonomous as he would wish to be. In reality a majority of professions have already lost their independence, and instead they have to operate within the constraints of large or small organizations. Haug and Sussman (1973) note:

Private practice as a style of professional work is rapidly disappearing, while many new and emergent professions have never practiced in anything except a bureaucratic setting. Under these circumstances, it is a particular bureaucratic structure, not some vague public or segment of public, which must be dealt with, and from which money, autonomy, and other perquisites must be extracted. (p. 92)

The disappearance of the "free professional" has troubled the sociological literature for quite a while. One extreme reaction to this concern was reflected in the claim of proletarianization theorists that all workers, including professionals, eventually lose control over their work and find themselves at the mercy of an administration which works for the interest of capital. The same theorists believe that the ultimate consequences of this transformation are the identification of the professional with the blue-collar worker and the formation of one social class of proletarians with shared views and interests (Greenwald, 1978).

Although proletarianization theorists carried their argument to the extreme, work autonomy among professionals should not be taken for granted. In his book *Professional Powers*, Eliot Freidson (1986) argues that professionals have considerable "technical autonomy," that is, latitude in using discretion and judgment for the performance of their day-to-day work without being constantly supervised and under immediate direction by others. They also have an important influence in policy making, and they may even be responsible for organizing, coordinating, or supervising others in their unit. In addition, those employed in the service sector have gatekeeping power and the power to provide or withhold services or goods to clients on behalf of the employing institution. These tasks are not managerial tasks but tasks which characterize discretionary work. Management, on the other hand, holds the exclusive control of resource allocation, the budgetary power to decide who gets hired and for how much pay, what work is to be done, what programs are supported, or what efforts are rewarded in an organization (McGee, 1971). In turn, as Freidson (1986) argues, "that power to allocate resources determines the particular kind of work that can be done and limits the way work can be done. When the generic power of the manager is specified, the autonomy of the special position of the professional employee seems to vanish" (p. 154).

This important differentiation in power is often the main cause of conflict between rank-and-file professionals and managers, regardless of the professional qualifications of the latter. Professionals often have their

own priorities based on what they think is important for their work and organization, whereas management tends to place an emphasis on cost efficiency and quantity. Union organizing is one solution in dealing with this disparity of power, which openly acknowledges the professional practitioners' restricted discretionary powers. Taken from that perspective, unions may also be seen as a means of protecting or even expanding work autonomy and securing a role for the rank-and-file in the determination of resource allocation. Once again, while professional associations try to protect the profession's status, interests, and job independence on a broad level by promoting its public image and exclusiveness to expertise, unions have a more direct involvement in protecting these aspects on behalf of practitioners.

#### THE DEBATE OF ECONOMIC VERSUS PROFESSIONAL VALUES

The issue of compatibility of unions to professional values has been much discussed while opinions are still split. Among the opponents of labor movement for professionals are those who believe that unions are a blue-collar movement; on the other hand, union proponents are convinced that collective bargaining can improve not only economic but also professional interests.

Historically, the labor movement has placed an emphasis on demands for better pay, benefits, or for job security, which are considered "traditional" issues on the bargaining table. Some have even accused the union leadership of, contrary to the membership's wish, placing a higher priority on these issues, sacrificing concerns of more intrinsic value (Sheppard & Herrick, 1972). The implication is that unions tend to cultivate among rank-and-file a higher value on bread-and-butter issues to the detriment of an appreciation of other types of rewards.

Research, mainly among nonprofessional groups, confirms that both union officials and union membership rank traditional bargaining issues higher than quality-of-work issues (Giles & Holley, 1978; Kochan et al., 1974). But is the concern over salaries and benefits really unprofessional? Salary and benefits often reflect the quality of professional work in an institution since good wages and benefits help employers attract and retain better professional employees (Rabban, 1991). Referring specifically to library employees, Lewis (1989) argues that decent salaries are necessary in order to be able to move beyond bread-and-butter concerns. She explains:

Salaries often are not a function of individual merit or skill, but are established by historic measures of worth and influence. Salaries are political. The historic wage gap between female jobs and male jobs is well documented. Librarians are the lowest-paid professionals for the years of education required and length of service in the work force. (p. 20)

Besides arguments for the importance of bread-and-butter issues, a recent study of professional librarians in academic research library institutions found that librarians in both unionized and nonunionized campuses tended to place similar importance on bread and butter, professional growth, or work environment issues. In an analysis of just the union group of respondents, the research found that registered union members tended to place a higher degree of importance on professional growth issues than did nonregistered members. Moreover, union commitment was found statistically significant and positively related to the degree of value placed on the same issues. In other words, those librarians most committed to their union tended to place a higher value on professional issues (Hovekamp, 1994b).

The distinctive characteristics of professional work have brought new challenges for collective bargaining and raised many questions on the transferability of the industrial model of negotiations. The peculiar nature of professional goals has been recognized even legally by the U.S. Congress in the Taft-Hartley Amendments, allowing professionals to establish their own separate bargaining unit. Simultaneously, there are those who believe that any inconsistencies between unions and professional values are the result of attempts to apply collective bargaining practices of the industrial sector to the unique setting of professional work (Rabban, 1987).

In recent years, unions, in recognition of the special interests of professional workers, have expanded the scope of negotiations beyond the federally mandatory topics of wages, benefits, and work conditions. Organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have been involved in educational reform, school restructuring, and other measures designed to enhance teaching and learning (Bascia, 1994). In the library field, similar examples indicate that unions have managed to secure organizational support for professional development, travel, participation in conferences, and continuing education opportunities. Other issues addressed on some academic campuses include tenure and promotion, especially in relation to everyday work load versus scholarly demands that concern librarians (Anderson et al., 1992).

In a study of 100 collective bargaining contracts for professional rank-and-file, Rabban (1991) found that professional issues frequently addressed in collective bargaining agreements fall under the following categories: (1) establishment of professional standards, (2) provision of mechanisms for the professionals' participation in decision-making, (3) regulation of professional work, (4) provisions on training and professional development, (5) allocation of institutional resources to professional goals, and (6) defining the criteria for personnel decisions and the role of the professionals in making them. Within these categories, Rabban

discovered a wide variation in the way these professional concerns were contractually treated with some provisions supporting traditional professional values and some not. Despite mixed results, the main conclusion of the research was that "the existence of substantial, unambiguous support for professional values in many agreements suggests, at a minimum, that unionization and professionalism are not inherently incompatible" (Rabban, 1991, p. 110). In other words, the presence of unions does not come with fixed results. Factors such as the type and quality of the employing organization, differences among unions, and the characteristics of the profession itself affect the degree of support of professional values as these may be reflected in collective bargaining agreements.

Economic concerns have been addressed by professional associations to varying degrees among different occupations. In the library field, the American Library Association (ALA) holds a rather lukewarm attitude toward the establishment of salary standards, simply publishing results of periodic salary surveys it conducts or minimum starting salaries based on recommendations by state library associations. As Harris (1992) notes, "the library associations tend to be library-centered rather than employee-centered with respect to such issues as salary and working conditions" (p. 105). As a consequence, library associations, in particular ALA, have been accused of siding with employers and sympathizing with their interests rather than with the employees. Harris believes that one of the main reasons why library associations refuse to assume any responsibility over identifying or resolving salary inequities is the mixed composition of their membership by rank-and-file, managers, and employers, an uncommon characteristic among professional associations.

The example of library professional associations is not however followed by other professional groups such as teachers or nurses, who have espoused a more active role for their associations in terms of salaries, benefits, or other working conditions. The AFT, NEA, AAUP (American Association of University Professors), and ANA (American Nurses Association) actively participate in the setting of both economic and professional standards for the occupations they represent. Although opinions are still split as to the effects of collective bargaining responsibilities that these associations assumed, the fact that they still represent these dual interests of professionals since the 1960s or 1970s attest to a history of some success and to the ability of a professional association to openly acknowledge the economic aspirations of a profession.

#### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OR UNIONS?

The above discussion points to the fact that professional associations and professional unions are not necessarily antithetical. They both can keep a profession cohesive by acknowledging both commonalities and differences, secure greater work autonomy, respond to the membership's

concerns for private benefits, and support both professional and economic values. Overall, they both can provide opportunities for a profession to apply stronger collective pressure for upward mobility than a single individual could. But where are they different?

One may argue that it is the profession itself that determines the differences. Some occupations, such as teachers or nurses, have allowed the joining of the two forms of organization into a new form that combines the functions of both a professional association and a union. Others have decided to keep the two separate.

In the library field, the separation between professional associations and unions has been quite distinct, particularly in terms of the role and tactics these organizations have assumed. This distinction seems to be clear in the minds of library professionals. For instance, in a recent survey among unionized librarians, respondents indicated that they view the two as "mutually exclusive" (Anderson et al., 1992, p. 338). On the one hand, unions tend to help library professionals deal with specific work-related issues or rights, taking on an active role in their day-to-day work life. Having the legal right to negotiate on behalf of the employees, they use more aggressive tactics through collective bargaining to protect and advance the professionals' work interests. Library professional associations, on the other hand, address the profession's issues on a broad scale, beyond institutional confines, taking more of an advisory or educational role. The tactics they use seek to enhance the status of the profession by dissemination of information, establishment of standards, and improvement of public relations through publications and lobbying. Because of this differentiation in role and tactics—i.e., openly advocating the interests of the profession versus indirectly striving for them—unions are often seen as a more effective way of coping with issues of importance in the employees' work life. For example, in their study, Anderson et al. (1992) found that the majority of surveyed librarians would rather drop their professional membership than leave the union in which they belonged.

An issue that has often been raised is whether a professional association, such as ALA, should take a more active and aggressive role in the work lives of professionals by assuming collective bargaining responsibilities. ALA is still far from such a resolution, and that might either reflect the wish of the membership or the fact that the professional rank-and-file still have not made their case strong and clear.

For the time being, a combination of professional association and union representation may help in achieving the goals of the library profession on a broad scale and on an institution-specific level. We simply need to recognize that these are two sides of one coin, both of them compatible with the special nature of the profession, and both with the potential to affect the occupation's status and welfare.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>The same study found that librarians were not very accepting toward their union. Some participants commented that unions were "aggressive," "irrelevant," "more concerned with the problems of the teaching faculty," or even that "Most employees stayed away from [them] because they feared for their jobs" (Hovekamp, 1994a, p. 305).

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