A STORY OF PROFESSIONALIZATION?
THE CASE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT DISCIPLINE IN ITALY
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Abstract The objective of this work is the study of project management (PM) as one of those new occupations involved in professionalization process. Focusing on Italian field I consider the actors involved in this particular scenario and the strategies they adopt. The analysis of this professional path, considering how the concept of professionalization is changing helps in considering that there is a shift towards a new organization of professions which are not necessarily organized as in the classical way, but become structured through new paradigms. The conclusion of this work even if based on a preliminary analysis (mainly from document analysis and interviews with main actors involved in the process) shows that the multitude of viewpoints makes the understanding of this process very complex. This research is conducted as an explorative study driven by the analysis of institutionalization of this particular field.

Introduction

The continuous changes of modern economy, especially in last 20 years, has created room for the development of many different expert professional figures (Faulconbridge, 2012). Since these groups of experts are lacking the training, qualifications, shared bodies of knowledge and regulation, that are conventionally linked with traditional professions, the researches were focused on understanding of possible professionalization patterns they would undertake (Alvesson, 1995; Brint, 1994; Fincham, 1996; Knights, Murray, & Willmott, 1993; Reed, 1996; Scarbrough, 1996; Starbuck, 1992).

Moreover an important consideration on new occupations is the pressure that they undergo by established professions, the corporations and more in general the nation-state. The reasons of competing with different actors are manifold: (1) with the established professions there is an issue of privileges erosion enacted by new professions (Greenwood, 1957); (2) with big corporations there is the attempt of the what so called “organizational closure” (Ackroyd, 1996), in order gain market benefits from the control of the occupation; (3) since the nation state grant a monopoly rights to some professions it has the interest in regulating it (Burrage & Torstendahl, 1990; Hanlon, 1999).

In this context in which new occupations are tighten between multiple agents with contrasting interests, it is important to consider the possibility that the development of new occupation would not follow the same path of the old and traditional professions. The institutions playing in this context shows to be incompatible with professionalization claim of new occupations (Broadbent, Dietrich, & Roberts, 1997; Reed, 1996). This gives the possibility to think that a different path from the traditional idea of professionalization can be developed by those occupations included in the broad process of institutionalization: “every project of professionalization contains within it a reciprocal project of institutionalization” (Suddaby, 2013)1.

Considering professional field in the past there are also different stakeholders involved due to a chance in the institutional context.

As in the view of Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby (2013), the analysis of the factors that influenced the “traditional” professions and the consideration of the modern institutional context bring me to reflect on this research question: how an occupation institutionalize its activities in to thrive into professional word?

In particular focusing on the case of Project Management (PM) there is the possibility to analyze one of those “new expert occupations” as in the definition of Muzio et al. (Muzio, Ackroyd, & Chanlat, 2008). In effect PM has been very actively working, through activities undertaken by its main actors, in order to follow the path of institutionalization process: it is “important to study occupations whose activity and situation is theoretically interesting as well substantively important” (Muzio et al., 2008: 2). Moreover it can be said that projects per-se have been developed since the ancient times (i.e., construction of pyramids), but it is in relative recent history (last 50 years) that the development of projects are carried out with the consciousness of PM as recognized occupation. This means that compared to the traditional and institutionalized professions, such as medicine and law, this occupation has a very short history and there is much room for the actors to claim their interests upon others actors.

In this work there is the attempt to describe this story from the perspectives of the different actors involved in this field. In particular through them it is possible to retrace the development path (through objectives, ideas, tactics and schemes) of the PM discipline.

1 Within seminar at Manchester Business School.
Theoretical Background

The birth of professions was driven by the nation-state as an instrument to protect citizens against professional experts who practiced that occupation. Historically professions have been created to standardize the level professional service quality. Once created they had always tried to defended themselves from different institutional contexts that no longer look at professions as necessary as the time which they were established (Evett, 1998). Thus professionals have become central and prestigious participants in world society (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997).

The sociological study of professions was born in the early twentieth century following a functionalist approach that use to consider professions as systems that contain within them a given set of different values and norms (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933); those studies evolved on a more structuralist thesis that considers professions as entities, with a lot of studies trying to find the distinctive elements that distinguish one profession from the others (Millerson, 1964). At the same time some studies highlight the processes through which an occupation achieves or claims to achieve professional status (Caplow, 1954; Millerson, 1964; Wilensky, 1964), thus considering it “professionalization as a process”.

The great power that the professions gained over time gave to them the possibility, in front of pressure from new and different institutional environments, to “defend” themselves (with different levels of success depending on the different country) as long as changes (toward outside relationships) and evolution (within them) happened. Indeed old professions all traditionally organized in the same way, due to different organizational pressure over time, have developed following slightly different occupational development projects. As a result of institutional changes and the increasing pressure exerted by the various actors involved, each profession has responded by evolving in a different way. Taking into account a distinction made by Muzio, Ackroyd, & Chanlat (Muzio et al., 2008) ideal categories of expert occupations can be divided in three distinctive types: collegiate professions, organizational professions and new expert occupations. While “collegiate professions” (such as lawyers) had some success in maintaining a certain degree of independence in organizing and owing their means of productions (Johnson, 1972), in the “organizational professions” (such as medicine) the story was different (Reed, 1996); the organizations use professional skills that are not owned and controlled by members of the profession itself, so basically they lost some of their original autonomy. The “new expert occupations” instead are those new occupations (such as consultancy) that present a completely different way to organize themselves with most regulatory power left to the market.

This kind of difference happened because nation state and economic environment was changing and “professions are identified with a particular phase of state development.” (Evett, 1998). The different characteristics of the economy, the development of so-called knowledge society have meant that the new occupations organize themselves following new forms and innovative strategies compared to the past.

Another consideration relates to the massive presence of large corporations that influence the ways in which professions are formed (Kirkpatrick, Kipping, Muzio, & Hinings, 2011). In this case PM is a good example because it grows within organizations that need to manage large projects in order to carry out their activities. The organization itself requires skilled professional figures to execute its projects due to the strategic importance that they hold.

Context

In this work, I focus on Italian context. In particular the actors identified as the key players are: (1) professional groups (such as Project Management Institute, International Project Management Association and ISItituto Italiano di Project Management); (2) lobbies; (3) big companies (Thales-Alenia, Siemens, IBM, ...); (4) Universities; (5) technical law associations (ISO for international level, CEN for Europe, UNI for Italy); (6) Italian public administration.

Looking at actors involved into Italian context it is necessary to underline the difference with other context (especially the Anglo-Saxon one). In particular one element of distinction regards to the role of the nation state and other actors such as lobbies and universities. Moreover in addition to the major international associations in the Italian panorama is also an association of PM which operates only at the local level ISIPM (Italian Institute of Project Management).

The presence of the nation state in Italian environment is particularly active, as will be explained below the Italian economic policy has always been particularly interventionist in questions regarding the regulation of professions (Deiana & Paneforo, 2010).

Another key player in this field is the “lobbies” (such as CNEL\(^2\), COLAP\(^3\) and CEPAS\(^4\) that, working closely with the administrative and legislative state bodies, can influence the decisions taken in this field.

\(^2\)Consiglio Nazionale dell‘Economia e del Lavoro
\(^3\)Coordinamento delle Libere Associazioni Professionali
\(^4\)Certificazione delle Professionalità e della Formazione
In this field it is worth considering also big corporations. In fact, even if the Italian economy is composed for the most part by small and medium enterprises, big companies, with the amount of projects that carry on influence this discipline path of professionalization.

Another issue in considering Italian field, concern the proliferation of PM courses in Italian universities. The embrace within universities courses of PM principles dictated by the professional associations is an important tool to foster their vision of PM profession.

Finally, there are associations for standardization (ISO at international level, CEN for Europe, UNI for Italy) who, through their actions, support the creation of standards in the various economic disciplines. With the aim to foster discussion between the various stakeholders those entities are an important factor in accelerating the construction profession.

In the final instance may be cited also the PA, since in Italy it contributes to GDP larger than in other western countries.

Retracing the professionalization path through these actors it is possible to represent PM through different dimensions. First of all theoretical dimension highlights the institutionalization of new forms of expertise. Then there is the political dimension representing the growing influence of this discipline in economic environment (with particular reference to the recent Italian reform of professions). The field is also examined as the conflict among PM professional associations with other professional associations.

Methods

The preliminary results of this work are based mainly on semi-structured interviews with practitioners and senior representatives of professional associations (PMI - Project Management Institute, IPMA - International Project Management Association, ISIPM – Istituto Italiano di Project Management); lobbies (CNEL, COLAP, CEPAS); standardization organizations (UNI); and some big corporations (such as: Thales-Alenia, IBM and Siemens). At the same time other data concerning other actors have been collected through documents analysis of Universities masters in PM.

The interviews were made following a semi-structured method in order to encourage active description by the subject that were interviewed (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This method is useful in this case because it helps in pushing people to consider topics that perhaps were not yet disclosed in their minds.

Interviews followed a written outline and lasted about 45 minutes and were digitally recorded, transcribed and anonymised. Since data analysis is at early stage, also results will be preliminary one. Next step will be the definition of categories of coding that will be structured in an iterative way around the broad theme of professionalization.

Discussion

The analysis of some interviews revealed a very complex scenario in which all the actors play an active role. This is explained in the analysis of the strategies they pursue; indeed there are conflicting interests very difficult protect at the same time. It is easy to abridge that how unlikely in this institutional context new occupations can develop into a profession following the traditional paradigm.

Looking at the data, among the actors depicted the central role around which orbits main interests and tension are PM professional associations. Those groups are central in this study because they implement several strategies that in order to foster the interest of the occupation and of their members. This consideration have sense because also in literature this topic is having an increasingly research attention (Scott, 2008): the analysis of professional groups as institutional agents. Professional groups, consisting of people that share similar roles and responsibilities, and face, even if being part of different organizations, same kind of problems, contribute to establish the group norms of conduct and qualification of members of a profession.

Looking at the past it is clear that history of PM is very old and elements of this discipline can be found even in ancient times with different areas of expertise. PM as an occupation instead is more recent and it is a dynamic field, in continuous change in order to comply with the market demand: “there is nothing static about it” (Chiu, 2010).

From the preliminary analysis of the data collected it is possible to conjecture the strategies that the actors interviewed undertake. This interpretation leads us to consider how the development of this occupation can no longer just have to follow a classical path of professionalization, but the presence of the several actors involved in this scenario (with particular reference to large corporations) would affect the type of professional development for this discipline. In particular, it is possible to consider hybrid professionalizations that consider old and new strategies. In effect coexists

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1Ente Nazionale Italiano di Unificazione
entrepreneurial and market led types pressures (from large organizations) with elements (carried out mainly by lobby and some professional associations), typical of classical strategies and tactics of professionalization.

This type of forces is evident especially considering the strategies of professional associations that promote the interests of powerful stakeholders at the expense of the less influential. The example of how the public events organized by them are often sponsored by big corporations and debate issues close to the interests of the latter is one important proof supporting this consideration.

An important limitation of this work lies in the difficulty to generalize to other context such research based on Italian context. This limitation inspired by (Muzio, n.d.) can be unraveled with a comparative study that can go beyond this type of limitation.

The contribution of this work is related to the institutional theory mainly on two sides: (1) help in understand dynamics that drive the work of institutional agents, (2) consider the professionalization as a subset of the broader process of institutionalization as in the view of Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna (Scott et al., 2000).

These considerations have emerged in result of the investigation carried out on the actors who populate this field. In fact, considering the various objectives and interests, and analyzing how various actors have acted to pursue their peculiar interests has been possible to reconstruct the path of professionalization covered so far by this occupation. In this sense I consider as in the view of Scott et al. (Scott et al., 2000) professions and professionals as agents in the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions; with particular focus on the importance of studying contemporary patterns of professionalization within the new occupational fields.

References


