Professionalism: Examining the Concept

Chronicling and analysing professorial professionalism presents challenges, not least because professionalism is a very contested concept. Not only do interpretations and definitions vary amongst those who research and study it, but they are also likely to deviate considerably from those used in the vernacular. The purpose, then, of this short chapter is conceptual clarity – to clarify what I mean when, throughout this book, I refer to professors' professionalism.

Evolving conceptions of professionalism

Professionalism is not generally considered an esoteric concept; since it is a widely used term everyone has an idea of what it means, and unless they have researched it in any depth, their understanding of it is grounded in everyday usage of the term, which represents professionalism as something desirable, something commendable and praiseworthy, something worth pursuing and claiming, and whose loss or diminution is therefore regrettable. Being 'professional' carries positive connotations, whilst 'unprofessional' is uncomplimentary. Moreover – and a factor that explains why those two adjectives (professional and unprofessional) have acquired such wide general usage and application – professional status seems to have been appropriated by increasing numbers of occupational groups or workforces over the last few decades. Yet this appropriation of professional status by the many, rather than the elite few, reflects a societal shift that has reshaped academic conceptions of professionalism.

Many recent analyses redefine and/or reposition professionalism within a framework determined by the context of twenty-first century working (and related social) life (e.g. Barnett, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2007; Scott, 2009). Precisely how this context is interpreted and depicted varies in the detail. Barnett (2011) highlights its 'networked complexity', which is defined by:

a set of infinities … of expanding accountability demands, resource challenges, global horizons of standards and developing techniques, shifting knowledges, and changing client relationships. There is no end to these changes; rather, they accumulate and expand, entering new regions of uncertainty. (Barnett, 2011, p. 31)

He likens it to thin ice upon which the 'modern professional' must skate, trying to keep ahead of its cracking behind her. Noordegraaf (2007, p. 770) describes it as 'fuzzy' and 'loosely ordered'.

The underlying issue in these depictions is the uncertainty of the context within which modern day professionals operate, arising out of its constantly changing form and nature, and which demand a new conception of professionalism: 'Ambiguous occupational domains call for an ambivalent understanding of present-day professionalism' (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 771). Barnett's new conception is of the 'networked', and, more specifically, the 'ecological' professional.

In the sociology of professions the focus has shifted from issues related to professional status and who should have it;[1] in the context of twenty-first century working life, these are no longer important (if they ever were). I am with Julia Evetts (2013, p. 780), who points out that '[t]o most researchers in the field it no longer seems important to draw a hard and fast line between professions and occupations but, instead, to regard both as similar social forms which share many common characteristics'. The consequence of this shift of priorities, she argues, is that we need 'to look again at the theories and concepts used to explain and interpret this category of occupational work' (Evetts (2013, p. 779). Accordingly, I present my own explanation and interpretation of professionalism.

Reconceptualising professionalism: An alternative interpretation

Kolsaker (2008, pp. 515–16) rightly reminds us that professionalism is 'a challenging concept to research, since the field is relatively under-researched, and such research as exists is criticised as ambiguous and lacking a solid theoretical foundation'. It is, she adds, 'inherently difficult to pinpoint' professionalism's constitution and characteristics – though, as I observe elsewhere (Evans, 2011), the implicit assumption that there is, or ought to be, a single, universally accepted delineation of these is questionable. Indeed, the shifting nature, and lack of consensus over the meaning, of professionalism is widely acknowledged, with

Gewirtz et al. (2009, p. 3) arguing for the 'need to work with plural conceptions of professionalism'.

My interpretation of professionalism is a far cry from the outmoded trait model of defining a profession and determining professional status. 'Profession' should no longer be – and, indeed, in everyday parlance often no longer is – a label applied to a few elite groups; we may now apply it fairly indiscriminately across the workforce's diverse, role-differentiated groups, making it the terminological norm, rather than the exception. Moreover, largely as a result of the reforms of the last few decades, few public sector occupations in the UK retain in full whatever autonomy they may once have enjoyed. Against classic professionalism criteria, therefore, few would technically (still) qualify for full professional status. What is often perceived as their deprofessionalisation, coupled with the trend of what may be construed as wholesale mass professionalisation (if only from a terminological perspective) has had a levelling effect that, arguably, has served to rob the label 'profession' of much of its cachet.

It is against the backdrop of this evolved and evolving context that I currently define professionalism as: *work practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession or occupation and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's or occupation's purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession or occupation, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice*. So-defined, professionalism is quite simply a description of people's 'mode of being' in a work context, irrespective of whether that translates into practice that is praiseworthy or practice that is despicable. Involving qualitatively-neutral practice, to me it is not – as the wo/man in the street would probably have it – a merit-laden concept. A consequence of its qualitative neutrality is that the term '*un*professional' becomes both meaningless and redundant. Since it applies to *all* workers, as an over-arching, comprehensive feature of them at work (I interpret 'at work' widely, to include any work-related activity, irrespective of where it occurs), professionalism does not denote status that one is likely to pursue or aspire to; it simply denotes how people 'are', at work. This interpretation probably overlaps with what is meant by 'practice', but I do not consider the two (professionalism and practice) synonymous because professionalism encompasses, yet is 'bigger' than, practice. Professionalism, as I interpret it, relates to and conveys: what practitioners do; how and why they do it; what they know and understand; where and how they acquire their knowledge and understanding; what (kinds of) attitudes they hold; what codes of behaviour they follow; what their function is – what purposes they perform; what quality
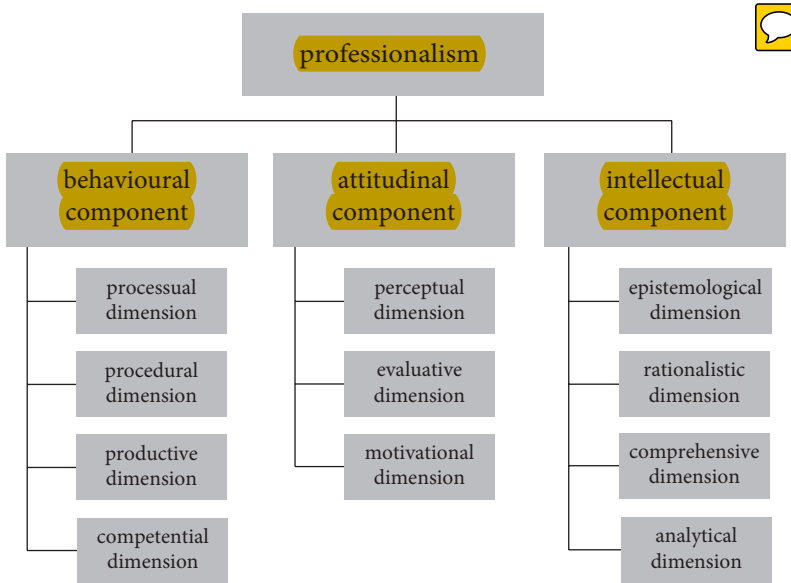
Figure 2.1　The componential structure of professionalism

of service they provide; and the level of consistency incorporated into the above. These are what I identify as the key elements or dimensions of professionalism as a concept: its 'constitution', to use Kolsaker's (2008) term.

This – my – conceptualisation essentially deconstructs professionalism into key constituent parts, labelled concisely and generically. Figure 2.1 represents my conceptualisation pictorially as a conceptual model that identifies three main constituent components of professionalism – behavioural, attitudinal and intellectual – each incorporating further elements or dimensions, explained below.

The behavioural component

The behavioural component of professionalism relates to what practitioners physically do 'at work'. Its sub-components are the *processual*, *procedural*, *productive* and *competential* dimensions of professionalism.

The processual dimension

Relating to the processes that an individual applies to her or his work, the processual dimension accounts for what is likely to be the single largest proportion

of her or his work-related activity. Vast in what it covers, denoting a plethora of activities representing multiple levels of hierarchically organised categories, the processual dimension of a person's professionalism includes interpersonal interaction (which, in turn, denotes more specifically-labelled activity, such as: collegial interaction; interaction with clients or students; interaction with managers; interaction with communities of practice; interaction with the public, etc.). It also includes reading, 'writing' (by hand, or through technology), speaking and listening (each of which may also – depending on its purpose and focus – represent interpersonal interaction). It includes sub-categories of each of the above list (such as chairing; debating; mediating; mentoring; public speaking). It includes occupation-specific activities, such as: driving or piloting; machine or system maintenance; demonstrating; copy editing; topiary; painting – and, of course, each of their constituent processes, for these activities may be labelled generically (e.g. researching) or specifically (e.g. data collection); each comprises multiple componental categories – layers within layers, like a Russian doll.

The procedural dimension

This relates to the procedures that an individual applies to her or his work, where a procedure is defined as an established or official way of doing something, or a series of actions carried out in a certain manner or sequence or order. In procedural activity the emphasis is thus on tradition or regulations or ritual or habit. Procedure overlaps with process; it may encompass or be encompassed within a specific process, and whilst its enactment will always involve processes, not all processes will involve procedures. It is also distinct from process insofar as it involves a set of 'rules' or 'rituals' (which may be formalised, or which may simply have been habitualised by the individual) that determine the nature of process.

The productive dimension

The productive dimension relates to an individual's output, productivity and achievement – to how much s/he 'does', and how well, and hence what s/he produces or achieves. In the example of an academic, the productive dimension of her/his professionalism is likely to be reflected in, *inter alia*, the quality and quantity of her or his: publications; research projects undertaken; conference papers presented; doctoral students supervised; courses taught; institutional citizenship undertaken; external partnerships initiated; and colleagues mentored.

The competential dimension

This dimension relates to an individual's skills and competences. It concerns what s/he is able to do or can do. It indicates skills sets and aptitude for performing key elements or aspects of the job. In relation to academics, it may, for example – depending on the discipline – reflect the extent to which, or how well, they can, *inter alia*: teach; write for publication; get on with colleagues or students; handle laboratory equipment; analyse data; make oral presentations; and explain complex ideas or processes to others.

The attitudinal component

The attitudinal component of professionalism relates to attitudes held. Its sub-components are the *perceptual*, *(e)valuative* and *motivational* dimensions of professionalism.

The perceptual dimension

This dimension concerns perceptions, beliefs and views held, and that (have the potential to) impact upon the individual's work. In the case of academics, the perceptual dimension may, for example, reflect their views on a multitude of wide-ranging issues, such as: the purpose of higher education; managerialism; internationalisation and globalisation; their institution's promotions policy and practice; car parking provision at work; and the gender balance in their department. This dimension also includes perceptions relating to oneself, hence *self*-perception and identity.

The (e)valuative dimension

Closely linked to the perceptual dimension, what I call the '(e)valuative' dimension relates to people's values. I interpret 'value(s)' widely, to encompasses not only 'grand' values, such as social justice, democracy, or freedom of speech, but also the day-to-day minutiae of what matters to people and is important to them: what they value and what they like – such as ample car parking at work, a pleasant and attractive work environment, and efficient and effective administrative systems. In the case of academics, their values could, for example, range from relating to issues such as academic freedom, through the prestige of working at a high ranking institution, to the flexibility of their jobs, or the pleasure of teaching a responsive group of students. Negative aspects of the work or the job – that are disliked and therefore not valued – are also encompassed in this dimension; it covers the entire positive-negative spectrum of values.

The motivational dimension

Influenced by the (e)valuative dimension, the motivational dimension – despite its abbreviated label – covers three job-related attitudes that I have demonstrated to be inter-related (Evans, 1998): motivation, job satisfaction and morale. It relates simply to the levels of one or more of these three attitudes: how high (or low) an individual's morale and/or job satisfaction are, and how motivated or demotivated s/he is.

The intellectual component

The *intellectual* component of professionalism relates to practitioners' intellectuality and cognition. Its sub-components are the *epistemological*, *rationalistic*, *comprehensive* and *analytical* dimensions of professionalism.

The epistemological dimension

As its name implies, the epistemological dimension relates to the bases of people's work-related knowledge and their knowledge structures – whether, for example, their knowledge is accepted on the basis of its having been disseminated by an expert or authority figure; whether it stems from folklore and/or superstition; whether it is derived from science or from self-discovery; as well as issues such as whether it is considered absolute or relativistic or contextual, or provisional or immutable. This dimension also covers issues related to the nature of people's knowledge structures, such as whether their knowledge represents a collection of pieces of information or integrated concepts.

The rationalistic dimension

The rationalistic dimension is about reason. It reflects people's capacity for applying reason to their practice, and the extent to and the frequency with which they underpin and justify their actions and/or decisions with a rationale.

The comprehensive dimension

The comprehensive dimension relates to the nature and extent of practitioners' work-related understanding. It is closely linked to the rationalistic dimension insofar as understanding may influence and explain rationality, while actions that have no rational basis may reflect lack of understanding of their nature and/or their consequences or implications.

The analytical dimension

This dimension relates to the nature and degree of people's analyticism and/ or analytical capacity. As with the comprehensive dimension, the analytical dimension may impact upon the rationalistic dimension of people's professionalism insofar as analyticism may precede, underpin and provide the impetus for rationality.

The conceptual model: A summary

My model of the componential structure of professionalism represents my view of what professionalism *is* – what it 'looks like'. It is, as I point out above, based upon my interpretation of professionalism as a merit-independent construct – as a qualitatively neutral form of going about one's work; something that is in many respects very similar to, but is also bigger and more expansive than, practice, since it encompasses dimensions that *may* be considered the impetus for, or the bases of, practice. The model is a conceptual, not a processual, one, so it does not denote or represent how an individual or an occupational group may become professionalised, or acquire professional status – indeed, my definition and interpretation of professionalism preclude any such processual association, for I do not see professionalism as something to be gained or lost, or available for some, but not others.

Yet how professionalism is conceived is complicated by another consideration: perspectives related to its purpose, and to how 'real' it is.

Four perspectival versions of professionalism

Elsewhere (Evans, 2011) I refer to professionalism as being thought of in relation to different 'reified states' – by which I mean professionalism considered on the basis of how 'real' or authentic it is. I have distinguished between four perspectives on professionalism which reflect its substance – and which may be applied to the professionalism of any given occupational group: professionalism that is *demanded or requested*; professionalism that is *prescribed*; *deduced or assumed* professionalism; and *enacted* professionalism.

Demanded (or requested) professionalism

Demanded (or requested) professionalism denotes professionalism that one constituency – or even one individual – implicitly or explicitly demands, requests

or asks of another. An employer may 'demand' a particular professionalism of her/his employees, and a government (as employer) may demand a particular professionalism of its public sector employees. Representing service level stipulations, guidelines or agreements, demanded professionalism typically manifests itself in the form of professional standards, codes of practice, or ethical guidelines, or through more explicit rules and regulations that convey the nature of how one is expected to think, behave, or feel in the context of carrying out one's work. Yet – and reflecting the form of demanded or requested professorial professionalism that is illustrated in the chapters in Part Two of this book – it can also be conveyed more subtly and implicitly through expectations that are held of a particular occupational group, and through the disappointment and dissatisfaction that is provoked by such expectations remaining unmet.

Most importantly, whilst the potency of any 'demanding' is likely to be greater if it is backed up by the kind of authority that an employer or manager may enjoy, 'demanding' in the form of expectations of a professional or occupational group may be held by anyone or any constituency impacted by, or with an interest in, how an occupational group carries out its work – including the general public, clients, work colleagues (junior or senior to the occupational group in question) and other stakeholders. Schoolteachers and parents may thus 'demand', through their expectations, a particular professionalism of a school headteacher, just as non-professorial academics may 'demand' a particular professionalism of professors.

Prescribed professionalism

This professionalism is that recommended by analysts or envisaged by them as potentially effective or beneficial for one party or another: the kind of professionalism that is not, but *ought to be*, evident. It represents, in a sense, a reflective or informed commentary on the professionalism of an occupational group. At the end of the twentieth century, for example, when government reforms in many Anglo-Saxon and European countries imposed tighter controls and standards on schoolteachers, a dominant discourse among educational researchers – as analysts or commentators on these events – urged teachers to regain control by resisting their potential deprofessionalisation through developing the kinds of internal regulation mechanisms that would make for a 'new professionalism'. In this scenario the prescribed professionalism was the 'new' professionalism recommended.

Deduced (or assumed) professionalism

Distinct from prescribed professionalism since it does not involve prescription or recommendation, this perspectival version of professionalism represents reasoned deduction and/or assumption or speculation about the nature of a specific professionalism: about what must have occurred, what must be the case, or what is likely to occur. The deduction or assumption may emanate from any party or constituency – including the occupational group whose professionalism is the focus. It is, in effect, a form of predicted or envisaged professionalism, where the prediction or envisaging are influenced by knowledge and understanding of the context within which the professionalism will develop. Characterised by analysis that goes beyond empirical data, it cannot constitute enacted professionalism since it is derived from deduction, rather than empirical observation. In a sense, deduced or assumed professionalism was the precursor to the prescribed 'new professionalism' for schoolteachers, presented as an example above, since the analysts who made it were basing their prescription on their assumption or deduction about how teacher professionalism would be impacted by the government reforms. Similarly, a French colleague and I (Evans & Cosnefroy, 2013) applied assumption or deduction, based upon our knowledge both of the policy context in France and of the outcomes of similar reform initiatives in other contexts, to our analysis of how the professionalism of academics in France was likely to change.

Enacted professionalism

The simplest and most straightforward of these four perspectival versions of professionalism, enacted professionalism – as its name implies – denotes professionalism that is enacted; that is, professional practice and its bases *as observed, perceived and interpreted* (by any observer – from outside or within the relevant occupational group, and including those doing the 'enacting').

How real? From insubstantiality to reification

The key point is that only the fourth of these versions of professionalism may be considered to represent 'reality' – albeit a phenomenologically defined reality. So, no matter what 'shape' (Evans, 2011) or nature of professionalism is 'demanded' by employers or colleagues, or 'prescribed' or 'deduced' or 'assumed' by analysts and commentators, it is 'enacted' professionalism that represents

the only meaningful conception of professionalism – that which practitioners/ professionals are actually seen or believed to be 'doing'. The other three versions of professionalism remain nothing more than visions, representing insubstantiality ranging from articulated ideology to wishful thinking.

Nevertheless, as I demonstrate in this book, demanded professionalism can act as a potent force, through the expectations that it conveys, for shaping how professionalism is enacted. Demanded and enacted professionalism are thus closely linked, the one influencing the other, and it is interesting to see, through the evidence presented in chapters in Parts Two and Three of this book, how junior academics' expectations of professors appear to influence the latter's enacted professionalism. One such key expectation is that professors demonstrate – or enact – academic leadership, but this is an unclearly defined term that means different things to different people. Chapter 3 addresses that confusion and opacity by analysing the concept of academic leadership.

Note

1   For an examination of how professionalism has historically been conceptualised and defined, and how conceptualisations within the sociology of professions have evolved over recent decades, see Evans, L. (2013).

Academic Leadership, Leaders, and 'The Led': Clarifying Concepts and Terms

This book is about professors as academic leaders. Yet as an epithet, 'academic leader' is problematic. The term has lodged itself very firmly in the higher education lexicon, denoting, in particular, role, purpose or function associated with senior academic status, so that today it would be almost impossible to find a job advertisement and accompanying job description and person specification for a professorship in a British university that do not explicitly emphasise the need for the appointee to practise academic leadership. Yet whilst it is bandied about glibly as something of a leitmotif in university leadership-and-management-speak, what academic leadership actually *means* – what it looks like and what it involves – is far from clear. Intended to address this conceptual lacuna, this chapter presents my conceptualisations of academic leadership, leaders and 'the led', whilst also highlighting the tensions between academic language and the vernacular that problematise this terminology.

Academic leadership as a concept: What we know and don't know

Academic leadership means different things in different countries or regions. As is evident from American texts (e.g. Birnbaum, 1992; Bolman & Gallos, 2011; Gallos, 2002; Hecht et al., 1999), in North America 'academic' seems to denote the context in which the leadership is carried out, and it prefixes an unproblematised interpretation of leadership – one that equates leadership activity with appointment to a recognised middle or senior management role. This narrow interpretation is also evident in the Australasian literature (e.g. Bradley et al., 2017; Debowski & Blake, 2004; Ramsden, 1998; Scott et al., 2008; Spiller, 2010); Australasia-based authors who seem inclined towards adopting

wider interpretations of academic leadership (e.g. Juntrasook, 2014; Youngs, 2017) represent the minority. Despite the narrative that frames it, distinguishing academic leadership from academic management, Bradley et al.'s (2017, p. 100) definition suggests an interpretation that, in incorporating a focus on institutional strategic vision, remains at some distance from how academic leadership tends to be interpreted in the UK:

> for the purposes of this paper, academic leadership is defined as 'the distributed practice of carrying out the institution's strategic vision while supporting the development of intellectual authority and a shared identity that fosters collegiality'.

In the UK, in contrast, academic leadership is for the most part understood as informal – often *ad hoc* – supportive development- or even empowering-focused interaction, such as mentoring or role modelling, which may occur independently of formal, designated leadership or management, and which often takes as its point of departure individuals' personal career- and work-related development needs, rather than institutional strategic vision and priorities (though, of course, the two may be closely aligned and the latter may inform the former). This conceptualisation is summarised in Bolden et al.'s (2012a) outline of the findings of their UK-based study of academic leadership:

> Findings reveal a high degree of consistency in perspectives on, and experiences of, academic leadership. In particular it was observed that *much of what could be considered as 'academic leadership' is not provided by people in formal managerial roles*. Instead, leadership arises through engagement with influential colleagues within one's own academic discipline, especially those who play a pivotal role in one's transition and acculturation into academic life. PhD supervisors, current and former colleagues and key scholars were all described as significant sources of academic leadership, exerting substantial influence throughout one's career, *whether or not they were part of the same institution*. (Bolden et al., 2012a, p. 6, emphasis added)

But with conceptual breadth comes opacity, for, so-interpreted, academic leadership has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention from what, as yet, remains a very small group of researchers (e.g. Bolden et al., 2012a; Evans et al., 2013; Juntrasook et al., 2013; Macfarlane, 2011, 2012a), and as a result, its meaning remains rather vague. Indeed, Bolden et al.'s is the only published definition of academic leadership, *so-interpreted*, that I have found:[1] [academic leadership is] 'a process through which academic values and identities are constructed, communicated and enacted' (Bolden et al., 2012a, p. 17). Most