Professionalization at work: The case of Italian management consultants

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abstract

Professionalization is one of the most ancient and popular issues in the sociology of the professions. Starting from the seminal article of Harold Wilensky (1964), scholars have extensively debated on which are the criteria to identify professionals, usually focusing on liberal professions. However, in recent years, post-industrial trends have transformed the character of the labour force dramatically and new groups have raised demands for professionalism going beyond this model. Such a dilemma raises a new interest on the topic: the paper, instead of applying the liberal professional model assumed to be an a-historical standard, will face the problem by analysing the challenges facing knowledge workers' seeking to legitimize their professional status.

In this paper, I address this issue through an in-depth analysis of Arianna's account, a female management consultant, using the technique of positioning. The interview with Arianna reveals the strategies and argumentative referents of a freelance management consultant who chooses to stress her professionalism. It presents the role of personal networks, on-the-job training, and market success as evidence to classify who is professional and who is not, but also to explain how she uses her competencies and market experience as the basis of her claim to professionalism. Using Arianna's interview as an emblematic example, this paper argues that management consultants are trying to establish professional status based on a process of professionalization, albeit an innovative one that does not pursue public regulation nor the mediation of intermediate bodies.

Introduction

Professionalization is the term used to describe how an occupational group achieves professional status. Scholars belonging to the traditions of

functionalism and neo-Weberianism have previously theorised and established a standard model by which a profession achieves this status; the model would involve prescribed steps in accordance with a specific time frame (Neal and Morgan, 2000). Thus, these theories have effectively described and explained the process by which those working in traditionally professional roles obtained public acknowledgment and recognition in the past (Malatesta, 2006).

However, in recent years, post-industrial trends have transformed the character of the labour force dramatically; notably, the upskilling of workers in a variety of jobs has been constant since the beginning of the 1980s, and was increasing noteworthy during the financial crisis of 2008 (Gallie, 2013). New expertise demands the application of technology to working activity, and expert workers are now required both inside and outside organisations, transgressing the traditional boundaries that denoted professional status (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2011). Meanwhile, the success of neoliberal policies in western economies has resulted in strong opposition to labour market regulation, thereby questioning the privileged position of those working in roles where they are designated professionals (Neal and Morgan, 2000). The theoretical reactions of scholars have been somewhat misleading; instead of analysing the alternative strategies of professionalization promoted by knowledge workers, the sociological debate has primarily concentrated on a 'pro-professionalism'/'non-professionalism' distinction. This divide assessed advanced business professionals by applying the liberal professional model, assumed to be an a-historical standard (Neal and Morgan, 2000; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Groß and Kieser, 2006; McKenna, 2008; Butler et al., 2012).

This paper addresses the challenges facing knowledge workers' seeking to legitimize their professional status, by looking at the discursive strategies of management consultants (henceforth MCs) (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Muzio et al., 2008; Donnelly, 2009; Bologna, 2011). MCs have increased in number, and are now one of the main occupational groups in the management domain (Kipping and Engwall, 2001). The role of market success in the social acknowledgement of the professions is increasing among knowledge workers, while intermediary bodies are reducing in importance (Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014), thus diverting the standard followed by liberal professionals substantially (Wilensky, 1964).

The current reality is that MCs continue to lack formal recognition for their activities, especially in countries such as Italy, where the system of professions incorporates a strong cleavage between protected professionals and other groups of expert workers (Ranci, 2012). For many reasons, those professionals are not able to accomplish the standard stages, as identified in the literature on

professionalization. Even if they identify with a corpus of knowledge, the constant drive towards innovation and transformation complicates the possibility of setting a standard level for each professional, while the dualism between individual professionals or SMEs and big international corporations in Italy is fragmenting the market, impeding the formation of a single interest group (Crucini, 1999; McKenna, 2008; Maestripieri, 2013). Consequently, Italian consultants are unlikely to achieve classical professionalization status, and the associated recognition (Groß and Kieser, 2006; McKenna, 2008).

Despite the barriers MCs face, this paper argues that they are trying to establish professional status based on a process of professionalization, albeit an innovative one that does not pursue public regulation nor the mediation of intermediate bodies. Their strong relationship with organisations, and their ideological aversion to any form of protection from the market is pushing them to search, not for the institutionalisation of their profession, but to gain a reputation in the market, as equal to and in competition with other experts in the management field (Maestripieri, 2013). This paper presents a narrative revolving around the professional legitimisation strategy of a freelance management consultant named Arianna; finding the alternative strategies implemented by her explicit in her arguments. In combination with other scholars (Essers, 2009), the arguments put forward here emphasise the consistency of a narrative approach, highlighting Arianna's efforts justifying her status as a professional by employing a positioning technique (Bamberg, 1997).

The interview with Arianna reveals the strategies and argumentative referents of a freelance MC who chooses to stress her professionalism, based on her own internal discourse and anecdotes taken from her daily life. It is anticipated that this will represent a small step forward in furthering understanding of the professionalism of MCs as an occupational group (McKenna, 2008). This investigation attempts to go beyond the traditional model of professionalization's analysis, based on the archetype of the *liberal professional*, to jointly analyse credentialism, autonomy, and professionalism. It presents the role of personal networks, on-the-job training, and market success as evidence to classify which MCs are professional and which are not, but also to explain how MCs use their competencies and market experience as the basis of their claim to professionalism.

At present, a lack of public acknowledgement forces MCs to search for recognition in their everyday interactions, bypassing the role of lobbies and formal associations (Maestripieri, 2013). In view of this, debate is fundamental, as interaction is the main social space in which legitimation might occur (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1969). As deliberation is on

going, it is logical to analyse the argumentative strategies by which MCs justify themselves as professionals, to understand how they are seeking to gain legitimacy. In particular, their claims cite the expertise and experience they have amassed within the field; they might also reference their survival in the current labour market. The story of Arianna adds to the contemporary debate about professionalization through a timely analysis of the discursive strategy of a management consultant, highlighting the arguments used in practice by a management consultant actively claiming professionalism.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the framework used to address professionalization is presented. It draws on theoretical perspectives about the concept of professionalization, as first defined by functionalist sociologists (Wilensky, 1964). The literature review also covers the stances of contemporary scholars who have revised the concept, following criticism of a narrow view based on public acknowledgement. Then the paper proceeds to outline the precise role of MCs in Italy, to explain why the Italian context constitutes an interesting case study for studying the dynamics of professionalization. After a brief presentation of the author's field research and a description of the methodological approach applied (involving an exemplary narration collected during an interview), the context is illustrated and analysed using the aforementioned case study about Arianna, a freelance MC. Conclusions will finally be presented, highlighting the theoretical assumptions of Arianna's case, as they emerged from analysis of the interview.

Studying professionalizing occupations

Harold Wilensky wrote an article in 1964, now considered a milestone in terms of disputing the issue of professionalization. Although his approach was deeply informed by functionalist theory, his article focused for the first time on the dynamics by which an occupation develops expertise, and the features that might integrate it within a group of acknowledged professions. For him, professionalization follows a standardised path, involving a number of steps that progressively institutionalise their members as professionals. These are: the development of identification with a body of knowledge, the creation of a group of practitioners to discuss common problems, the creation of schools and a university to provide specific oriented training to practitioners, institutionalisation by public regulation, and lastly the establishment of a formal code of ethics. These steps, as identified by Wilensky (1964), all apply to those professions with a high level of social recognition (Butler et al., 2012), i.e. lawyers, doctors, etc. (Abbott, 1988; Malatesta, 2006). However, in many cases scholars have interpreted this trajectory not as a historical and contextual solution

to the problem of legitimation (Brint, 1994; Middlehurst and Kennie, 1997; Neal and Morgan, 2000; McKenna, 2008), but as a process of inevitable and unproblematic acknowledgement of a professional activity (Butler et al., 2012).

Thus, it is evident that sociologists examining professionalization have considered this issue over many decades (Neal and Morgan, 2000); certainly professionalization, as an enforced by law designation, has been one of the main differences dividing the continental and Anglo-Saxon system of professions (Sciulli, 2005). Starting from the pioneering work of Harold Wilensky, the debate has involved several scholars working from different theoretical perspectives.

For neo-Weberian scholars, the importance of professionalization centred on the attainment of a form of legal regulation and protection, permitting members to perform strategies such as market closure and to create boundaries within different groups (Sacks, 2012). Abbott (1988) defines the professionalization process as the development of professional activities based on attaining a jurisdiction over a particular specialisation of knowledge, which can then be regulated and protected. This typically follows a common pattern for all professions, although there may be differences relating to timing. Similarly, Freidson (2001) states that professionalism is recognised when an organised group of workers obtains the power to determine who can access the profession, impedes others from performing similar activities, and controls the criteria by which good work is judged. Credentialism is the basic mechanism sustaining a monopoly on the jurisdiction and access to the professional market (Larson, 1977; Brint, 1994; Freidson, 2001; Malatesta, 2006). However, formal knowledge and formal education should not be overestimated. Even among well-established professions, many acquire qualifications within the field during on-the-job learning, contradicting the role assigned to credentialism by previous literature (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002).

In the cases of both functionalist and neo-Weberian scholars, attention is limited to well-established professions that have already achieved strong social recognition, and which have acquired full jurisdiction over certain bodies of knowledge (Abbott, 1988). For this reason, they deem only institutionalised professions as worthy of inclusion as objects of study, since the main objective of neo-Weberians is to assess closure strategies; by contrast, functionalists are more interested in defining the criteria by which an occupation can be considered a profession.

Interestingly, although contemporary post-industrial economies emphasise professionalization, an increasing number of occupations fail to comply with the traditional process of professionalization. This is despite their expert nature, and

despite the fact that organisations increasingly need competent workers able to utilise their knowledge (Brint, 2001). Professionals working in advanced business services have not developed a strong identification with prescribed bodies of expert knowledge, as these quite often overlap with similar occupations (Butler et al., 2012). Moreover, the success of neoliberal discourse has raised doubts about the pathway to professionalization: market-driven approaches, a stronger deregulation in public regulation of professional activities, and the increasing promotion of individual values that are not easily attributable to market closure strategies or to integration into intermediate bodies (Neal and Morgan, 2000; Adams, 2012).

Thus far, the inability to professionalize oneself following traditional steps set out by legitimate professionals has not impeded the growth of knowledge occupations. Over the last decade, advanced business services have been among the fastest growing branches of the economy. In recognition of recent changes in practice, there is a growing interest in professions on the margins (Butler et al., 2012). A growing proportion of knowledge workers do not abide by a traditional notion of professionalism, and scholars have begun to focus on their neglected position in the sociology of professions.

Extending the field beyond the perspectives of functionalist and neo-Weberian authors, scholars have increasingly criticised the institutionalised conceptualisation of the professions since the 1970s. Authors including Becker (1970) and Hughes (1984) confirm that nominal professional status only functions to sustain an individual's claim to be recognised as an elite worker (Hughes, 1984); this leads them to criticise the supposed neutrality of the concept (also in De Saint Martin, Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1973 and Chapoulie, 1973). These scholars argue that it is misleading to suggest that professionalism is a scientific term, offering evidence that professionalism has been used largely as a tool to sustain a claim to a privileged social position (Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011). Professionalism, in this sense, conveys a pervasive and taken-for-granted superiority: it is built into discourse and pursues arguments to justify the special status of workers based on the possession of specific expertise that extends beyond formal credentialism (Hanlon, 1998; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). For as long as a group is permitted to claim professionalism for its own activities, this recognition might be a basis for ascending mobility (Hughes, 1984).

In view of the ongoing granting of a professionalism status to some groups, scholars have raised the unsolved theoretical issue of the professional legitimation of knowledge workers, since they do not typically share the standard form of credentialism evidenced among the well-established professions.

Legitimation usually implies external validation, and an interlocutor must perceive and accept such claims as proper and appropriate in reference to a wider system of shared norms and values (Suchman, 1995; Sillince and Brown, 2009; Maclean et al., 2012). As already stated by Goffman (1969), the legitimation process is based on a moral judgement by others based on everyday interaction; i.e. when an individual chooses to position himself or herself as a professional, she or he is claiming a moral right to be treated as a legitimate professional. Individuals use argumentative justifications to define their own behaviours and claims as reasonable: the content of social norms are then expressed via those justifications (Goffman, 1969). The legitimation process is complete when an entity becomes embedded in the taken-for-granted assumptions of actors (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005).

The question of how subjective meanings become objective taken-for-granted assumptions has been widely debated since Berger and Luckmann's theorisation (1966), but remains unanswered, as professionalization processes extend beyond the path of the classical professions, such as lawyers or doctors. Self-legitimation strategies are the key to determination, as over the previous decade, scholars addressed this issue by lending credence to legitimating accounts by individual actors, especially in the organisational domain (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Vaara and Tienari, 2008; Maclean et al., 2012). The analysis of the arguments presented in this paper demonstrate in practice how a freelance professional in the management consultancy field uses different argumentative resources to justify her position as a professional, in particular how she bases her claims for professionalism on her own expertise. This case is particularly interesting since the uneven integration of MCs into the Italian system of professions forces its members to press their arguments forcefully.

Management consultants and the problems of recognition in Italy

The post-industrial society (Bell, 1973) has been defined by a shift from an economy based on the production of goods to one focused on scientific and technical knowledge. This transformation is apparent in the steady growth of service producers and professionals (Bell, 1973; Drucker, 1993; Maione, 2001). In this context, knowledge gains importance at the expense of capital and manual labour as the labour force becomes progressively professionalized (Collins, 1997). Labour in the new society is based on advanced business services incorporating features like expertise, autonomy, discretion, reputation, prestige and professional standards; workers perform professional activities beyond traditional forms of institutionalization, operating mostly within in conjunction with organisations. Some scholars have used the label 'knowledge workers' to

identify this group (Brint, 2001; Darr and Warhurst, 2008); among these MCs are considered prototypical (Meriläinen et al., 2004; Donnelly, 2009; Bologna, 2011).

In Italy the contemporary difficulties facing those in diverse employment arise from an imbalance in public regulations. These divide workers into those in the protected professions and the remainder of the unregulated market (MCs included), who are excluded from public intervention and related credentialism (Ranci, 2012), creating a huge gap between professionals. Italian public regulation has been slow to respond to the transformation of the labour markets, following the shift to a post-industrial pattern of economic development. In the Italian system, a strong corporatist approach, in which public institutions protect the professionalism of certain activities, is followed (Salomone, 2010). These bodies (named Orders and Registers in Italy) aim to not only protect professionals' activities and their knowledge, but also serve as a guarantee for the client. As a consequence, only those professions considered of social relevance have been included in the group of protected professions, for example, doctors, lawyers, engineers and architects. Unlike the bottom-up evolution that characterises the professionalization process in Anglo-Saxon countries (Sciulli, 2005), the establishment of professions in Italy has followed the continental model, relying on the state to structure a system of professionalization (Neal and Morgan, 2000; Malatesta, 2006).

As knowledge workers grow in importance within the economy, an increasing number of professionals are excluded by this model, in which the state has institutionalised its systems of public regulation (Collins, 1997). Although the services provided vary, knowledge workers are generally not integrated into the classic system of professionals, and are not easily recognisable in terms of standard definitions, because of the absence of public acknowledgment for their activities, as well as the precarious formalisation of training and the missing standardisation of competencies (Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014).

The most important consequence of workers being outside of the traditional system of professions is that they cannot participate in standardised credentials schemes. The professional/client relationship is based on trust, and clients buy expertise that they do not have and which they are often unable to assess (Alvesson, 2001). The professionalization process should resolve this dilemma by offering a series of guarantees: ensuring a minimum level of competencies for certified professionals, as well as protecting the members of a community against peers who have not met the standards required to engage in the professional activity (Groß and Kieser, 2006; McKenna, 2008). This is why the Italian state previously created a system of orders and registers accessible only by

acquiring formal credentials, such as a specific university degree for each profession, a state exam to certify competency, and inclusion in a register of professionals (Malatesta, 2006). At present, this system is in crisis: instead of acting as a guarantee of a minimal standard of quality, it has become the most important instrument of social closure (Collins, 1990), as played out by professional groups in order to maintain privileges. Professionals are increasingly forced to address new forms of credentialism that extend beyond this model to include informal social networks, reputational mechanisms and organisational brands (Greenwood and Epson 2003; Brock 2006; Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014).

For MCs, much like other groups of knowledge workers characterised by the recent process of professionalization, there is no public regulation; meaning there is now no formal requirement to meet in order to perform the job. Perceived public 'indifference' has resulted in a situation in which there is no recognised community of experts, whose formal membership can guarantee expertise (Alvesson, 2001). This means MCs struggle for recognition, activating individualised strategies to state their credentials, building long-term relationships with clients, relying on reputation mechanisms mostly based on word of mouth, and the tactical use of organisations to denote quality (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014). The market structure makes it difficult to operate a synthesis between the different interests of MCs organisations through the institution of a professional association. In Italy, there are only two associations for MCs: one is devoted solely to enterprise (ASSOCONSULT) and the other (APCO) to SMEs and freelancers (Crucini, 1999; Maestripieri, 2013); thus far, neither has become the main referent for professionalization claims by MCs.

Nevertheless, even where MCs claim professional identity based on the possession of expert knowledge and a specific competence, their social recognition as professionals is fragile, and their integration into the system of professions is unstable at best. Some scholars have described their position in the labour market as precarious, even vulnerable, in the sense that they are open to exploitation (Kitay and Wright, 2007). MCs are embroiled in a struggle for legitimation (Demazière, 2009), and as scholars have already underlined, since this is a matter related to power, they still do not have enough to sustain their position as professionals (Vaara and Tienari, 2008). Meanwhile, legitimation is not a process that happens immediately, as long as its function is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible a fixed set of institutionalised knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

The next section describes MCs' strategies for professionalism, by illustrating the case of an MC seeking to position herself as a professional. The in-depth analysis of her argument reveals her strategies to claim legitimation at a micro level, and contribute to knowledge of how the process of professionalization functions for knowledge workers in the absence of public acknowledgement. MCs argumentative claims for identity as professionals are much stronger than for many other professional groups, who have already achieved strong social recognition. It is essential for MCs to state these arguments when they present themselves as professionals, and Arianna's words show some of the stock of arguments MCs use to justify their position.

Research design

This paper is derived from a larger body of research conducted in 2007-2010 as part of the author's PhD thesis project, the general aim of which was to study the professional identity of MCs in Italy (Maestripieri, 2013). For the original thesis, 22 biographical interviews and 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted with MCs in Italy; 23 of whom were freelance professionals. The following discussion section revolves around a single narration by Arianna, chosen from the authors' PhD corpus of interviews because it clearly shows the argumentative strategies utilised by the speaker in order to legitimise her position as professional (Davies and Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 1997; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Kohler-Riessman, 2008; Watson, 2009). The account of Arianna, a freelance professional, active in the management consultancy market for the last three decades, questions the issue of social recognition, discusses the absence of a role played by intermediate bodies, and the strategies put in practice by professionals to legitimize themselves.

Scholars have already presented discursive accounts of the professions in order to highlight issues of professionalization, especially when examining how it can function to create organisational and occupational meaning (Vaara, 2002; Adams, 2012). Interviews are the discursive vehicle by which individuals reaffirm their subjectivity and identity (Maclean et al., 2012; Jansen, 2015). Using narrative methods makes it possible to investigate how workers use rhetorical strategies to justify their claims: first, by focusing on the temporal dimension of biographies (Bichi, 2000) and, secondly, by respecting the subjective dimensions that interviewees place on their accounts (Kohler-Riessman, 2008; Jansen, 2015). Therefore, the subsequent section of this analysis will revolve around a narrative approach, using the positioning method to highlight Arianna's argumentative strategy (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Poggio, 2004; Kohler-Riessman, 2008).

The narrative analysis in the following section problematizes the existing framework of professionalization theory. Arianna's arguments challenge its standard approach and encourage the need for critical reflection upon it, given the challenges set by the post-industrial transformation in professional activities, and rethinking conventional wisdom about the professionalization process (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). The positioning technique of analysis can highlight the critical dimensions, by focusing on how an individual constructs his/her public image making himself/herself intelligible to others. In particular, it emphasises the flux in thoughts about oneself, and examines how feelings shift according to the situations (Jansen, 2015).

When using this technique, the researcher's aim is twofold: first, to analyse Arianna's account by considering her an individual creative agent of narrations, and by investigating her use of agency to define her professional self; second, to reveal how her identity is rendered social in reference to a common set of commonly acknowledged narratives, shared by members of her professional group (Tirado and Galvez, 2007). The interview method is ideal to interrogate such issues; as part of the biographical pact (Bichi, 2000), the interviewer guarantees the interviewee that their narratives are not subject to criticism or evaluation. Therefore, instead of focusing on their validity, this type of analysis is ideal when highlighting how professional identities are presented in the context of the interview, and when explaining why interviewees choose to present themselves as they do (Jansen, 2015).

Of course, a single interview cannot be representative of all Italian MCs, but the interview with Arianna is of particular interest because she puts considerable effort into justifying her position as a professional. It is possible to deal with the majority of the issues raised during the full set of interviews the author conducted by presenting Arianna's case. Her account is an emblematic example of the struggles lived by Italian MCs when seeking social recognition for their professional activities (Maestripieri, 2013).

Findings and discussion

Arianna is a 55-year-old female worker, who lives in a suburb of Milan. She has a degree in psychology and has worked as a freelance MC since the beginning of the 1990s. In 1997 she started her own small consultancy firm together with two partners. After some years of good results and strong engagement in the labour market as a small entrepreneur, in 2008 she decided to close her business after separating from her husband. Now, she is again performing her job as a solo freelance consultant. Her job has played a very important role in her life, and she

has always been the 'breadwinner' in her family. She has a strong emotional and practical attachment to the consultancy market:

> I love my job, I have experienced difficult times when I had few projects on, but I've always been a positive person, I've always thought that things will get better in the future. For me, being a self-employed professional has never been a concern, I will work, I will earn, and projects will come because I've a network of colleagues, right? You need to cultivate your relationships. You must prove to be a likeable person; if people see a value in what you're doing, then clients and colleagues will call on you for projects.

Her main point here is that she has expertise and experience gained throughout her lengthy career as professional consultant, an argument already highlighted in previous analyses reported by other scholars (Hanlon, 1998; Hodgson, 2008). In her words, the success she has gained in the market and the recognition from her colleagues demonstrates her competence. Arianna's relationships are the basic element that sustains her career as self-employed professional, but her success in the marketplace enables her to define herself as a competent worker. Intermediate bodies do not mediate between clients and professionals in this case and only her reputation and personal relationships denote her professionalism, guaranteeing her competence.

However, Arianna still feels insecure as to regards the societal recognition of her profession. Her insecurity derives from the lack of a formal credentialism. In fact, firstly, she has not followed a standardised course to become a consultant as long as she trained herself *on-the-job*. Secondly, she belongs to a professional association (the association of psychologists) that does not recognise her specific competence. Not unsurprisingly, the main reason why she is a member of the professional psychologists' association is the practical advantage in terms of the social protection offered by Orders (Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014). Notwithstanding, in terms of social recognition and jurisdiction, her job has no relationship to the standards required of therapeutic psychologists in Italy: as a consequence, her specialisation in organisational psychology and her activity as a management consultant is not recognised by her peers.

Her argument continues then with affirmation of management consultants' solitude (she speaks about a *club*) and the substantial incapacity of people to recognise her professionalism.

> Sometimes I've the impression that we're few... we're kind of a club, we recognise each other, but I don't know how much... you know how that is! It is that the word consultancy fills up the mouth? I'm a member of a sports association, since I separated from my husband; I have been hiking with these people, and then you talk and someone asks me – 'but what's your job?' 'I'm a management consultant, working in the empowerment of human resources' 'and what does that mean?'

> [Arianna laughs] That is, somebody doesn't even dare to imagine it. In my opinion it is not really that people don't know, but it's barely defined, because the word consultancy has many meanings. Now my neighbour who sells Avon products calls herself a consultant [she laughs again]. They call themselves beauty consultants – them?! You understand me... what kind of a word is this? And so I've some remarks on this issue to share with you... but we should ask - those who look at us... what do they see in us?

Her main argument, in the first part of the extract, relates to the meaning of the word consultancy, which is insufficiently defined to legitimise her as a professional. People who do not participate in advanced business sectors do not understand her activity and role in the labour market; nor do they know what the job of consultancy means in practice. This is also a consequence of the fact that consultancy is not integrated into the language of common-sense reality, as long as, Arianna points out, people in general are unfamiliar with what consultants' professional activities involves. Although people understand that consultancy is somehow related to expertise, as long as it requires high specialization to be performed, it is difficult for her to understand how others perceive her ('those who look at us... what do they see in us?').

This inability to self-describe and be understood also relates to the fact that the word 'consultancy' not only refers to management activities, but also is frequently used by other workers aiming to participate in a discourse of professionalism (Fournier, 1999; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). For Arianna, however, there are boundaries between her and them; these relate to the expertise she claims to have to perform her own job. In her opinion, the other consultants that she references (such as beauty consultants) are not professionals. She judges them on the basis of their human capital and she justifies her supposed superiority by basing her arguments on her experience as a real professional worker. Otherness is a quality that is very important when creating barriers between professionals and occupations, as long as references to the other define the legitimate limits of expert labour and non-expert labour are drawn (Adams, 2012; Ashcraft et al., 2012). This is argued on the basis of marginalisation and difference from others (Adams, 2012), something that Arianna references when mentioning Avon sellers. Indeed, the idea that people misuse the word 'consultancy' to connote professionalism is discussed in her interview; she states that it is a word used only to 'fill up the mouth'.

In fact, Arianna positions herself against other professionals in terms of competencies and expertise. Her attitude is not neutral, and relies on the fact that professionalism in itself was associated in the past with the dimensions of prestige and status, as professionals belonged to the intellectual establishment. Arianna's discourse about professionalism is instrumental; it lets her claim an

identity *tout-court* professional, it also serves to make a good impression. It enables her to present herself as holding a prestigious and stable position in a system of professionals. Professionalism is something that a series of actors, from her viewpoint, do not want to assign to consultants.

> MCs are people who borrow your watch to tell you what time it is, and after that they'll leave with it [Arianna laughs], that's it, this is Robert Townsend. I believe that this idea is spread across a lot of firms... that the consultant arrives and he hasn't got anything special to say, he is just able to tell you something you already knew, but maybe you needed someone to do it, to legitimise you – OK? This is just a doubt I have, but moreover I've seen it in how people look at us, and the fact that there are a lot of braggarts in this world! They have discredited our profession as consultants – who is a consultant? You understand... everybody! That is, you see just graduated teenagers, who because they've taken a little course in counselling can become counselling consultants, and they go flaunting it right and left. And then they do things that make you say bah! What is a consultant?

These extract evidences another struggle lived by consultants when claiming professionalism. In fact, even theoretically, the concepts 'pro-consultancy' and 'non-professionalism' divide theorists. Scholars separate self-promoting manuals and critical academic analysis; designations largely based on theoretical assumptions rather than empirical analysis. Thus, the consolidated image of consultancy in theoretical debate is characterised by ambiguity, while at the same time being appealing and provocative (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). If enthusiastic supporters highlight the capacity of MC professionals to promote organisational change, academic detractors can reject their expert status, because the criteria of liberal professions are not accessible to liberal professionals (Groß and Kieser, 2006; McKenna, 2008). MCs certainly struggle with this ambiguity in their everyday interactions, explaining Arianna's need to justify herself relative to Townsend's critique.

At least in Italy, this situation is not only a matter of theoretical debate, but a direct consequence of the public regulation regime, which characterizes the Italian professions system. Protected professions have the right to take legal steps when someone abuses their professional title (as it is stated by Law 348 of the Penal Code); however, there is no protection extended when using consultants and other unregulated professions' titles (Salomone, 2010). One of the reason why MCs are not subject to protection lies in the structural dualism that characterises their market: the tension between the interests of professional services firms and the professional aspirations of individuals impedes the collective effort to achieve full professionalization, following the traditional steps taken by other professionals (McKenna, 2008). Consequently, the lack of a generalised system of formal credentialism determines the presence in the market of a large number of suppliers because of weak closure mechanisms.

Even where there is an individualised claim of professionalism, based on the possession of specific expertise, there is still no social space identified from Arianna's point of view to determine which group might direct legitimation. Furthermore, the word 'consultant' has not yet acquired common sense meaning in everyday life: along with MCs, this word is used instrumentally as a 'status symbol' by a series of other subjects (more or less expert in their field), thereby putting into question the recognition of MCs' professional status.

The practical consequences of the lack of formal recognition for freelance professionals include the difficulty in marginalising malpractice and problematic acknowledgement of others. Building a solid reputation and maintaining this throughout one's entire career is fundamental to successfully competing in the market; this is also the foundation upon which to build legitimacy as a professional. In fact, especially for freelance MCs, word of mouth is the main mechanism by which to acquire customers, since they cannot prove their credentials other than informally (Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014). Since they are unable to exercise closure against those who do not respect a minimum standard of quality, self-legitimation is one of the few strategies they might employ to gain trust from the client, aside from referencing branding and organisations (McKenna, 2008; Maestripieri, 2013; Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014), as Arianna clearly explained in her interview.

The situation in which MCs live and work often results in mockery and accusations, and a common allegation that consultants simply sell 'hot air'. In fact, as Arianna also confirms, the popular image of consultancy is extremely negative; with MCs characterised as legalised fraudsters. Italian management consultancy professionals are aware of this negative reputation (Maestripieri, 2013); they affirm that their clients believe consultancy is somewhat redundant, and MCs are just good at selling themselves and convincing clients of the usefulness of their projects. Clients often hire consultants instrumentally, as Arianna points out, in order to legitimise a managers' power within an organisation and to share the responsibility for decision-making, or to spread blame if something is wrong (Alvesson, 2001; Sturdy et al., 2009; Maestripieri, 2013). This situation of general mistrust and diffidence is not simply a linguistic concern, but also one that has a direct impact on MCs relationships with clients, as long as it effects the consolidation of trust between professionals and clients (Hughes, 1984; Clark, 1995).

In conclusion, there were two rhetorical goals expressed during Arianna's interview, both based on her expertise and experience as a mature member of the field. Firstly, she sought to convince the interviewer of her legitimate position as a professional, despite the fact that a series of key actors do not acknowledge it

(as common people or state); secondly, she defines and presents her identity as a professional in contrast to other 'non-professional' actors. Nevertheless, she cannot be wholly successful in her claim; the Italian system of professions and its corporatist approach in public regulation excludes from formal acknowledgement all those professional activities that do not participate in the system of Orders. Thus, Arianna cannot make reference to an institutionalised set of common knowledge associated with the concept of management consultancy, because her idea of professionalism is embodied in a discourse of justification based on individual expertise and ability to survive in the marketplace.

Conclusions

Starting from a theoretical position that considers acknowledgement in reference to public regulation as one possible outcome of professionalization, the discussion herein relied upon the account of Arianna, a freelance MC since the beginning of the 1990s, working in Italy. The Italian case is particularly relevant, as it is characterised by a stronger corporatist approach than other European cases, thus increasing the divide between liberal professionals and knowledge workers in terms of social recognition, credentialism and social protection (Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014). Italian MCs, since their status is unstable and marginal in reference to the system of professions, highlight a new approach to professionalism more widely in their narrations, which make studying their cases interesting.

In the analysis of Arianna's account, it was possible to highlight how market mechanisms, rather than formal credentialism, were important in helping her claim professional status (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). These assumptions contradict the classical notion of professionalism, in which standards and quality are assessed by peers through the mediation of intermediate bodies; instead Arianna relies on reputational mechanism, market success and personal relationships (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Maestripieri, 2013; Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014). Her professional claims are more likely to emerge in circumstances where she compares her professional standing against that of other relevant figures within society, such as among professionals or common people, rather than relying on positive affirmation from consultants as members of a recognised group.

The main elements raised when discussing Arianna's discursive strategies are that she uses her argument for professionalism to support her status and her legitimation as a competent worker. Such claims are commonly based on the

possession of certain social characteristics, establishing aspects such as expertise and competence, and not formal regulation and acknowledgement. The attachment to the market and her expertise becomes the main component of her justifications. These trends have already been reported previously (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002): the demand for MCs knowledge from the market, and the rewards associated with professional activity imbue MCs with professionalism, even if they do not participate in the standard requirements set out for professionalization (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). In the extracts presented, Arianna sustains the same point: she feels professional, because she can prove that over her longstanding career as a freelancer her professional activities have been approved by her clients and colleagues, and she has gained a specific professional profile due to her experience within the field. To all intents and purposes, Arianna's rhetorical strategies show how she justifies her claims of professionalization through individual agency, bypassing the need for credentials given by an intermediate body.

However, even if Arianna might share a set of values and identities with her peers, she lacks the foundation of an institutionalised social space (Wilesnky, 1964). At present, MCs cannot rely on a strong lobby to sustain the institutionalisation of their common knowledge. However, following the same path toward public institutionalisation that has characterised protected professions in the past is a false solution for MCs (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Groß and Kieser, 2006). First, the neoliberal approach is now mainstream in Europe, requiring national states to deregulate and weaken mechanisms of market closure in already existing Orders and Bars (Neal and Morgan, 2000). Moreover, management consultancy is composed of several components, which rely on heterogeneity and diversity as characteristics of their expertise. This means the practical content of MCs' professionalism is too complex to reduce to a standard set of competencies (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). Last but not least, the Italian market is at present characterised by a strong dualism between big multinational corporations and PMEs or freelance professionals, who are serving the small firms that now typify the Italian economy (Crucini, 1999; McKenna, 2008), thus hindering the institutionalization of a unique professional association.

In addition, we argue here that formal professionalization would be more of a constraint than a powerful resource for MCs (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002), since it would promote conformism over innovation, not necessarily resulting in greater efficiency and effectiveness (Di Maggio and Powell, 1991). MCs would surely benefit from increased professionalism, but only if the formalisation of their knowledge base and the definition of a minimum standard allows them to protect   clients   and   themselves   from   malpractice.   Therefore,   any

professionalization must occur in a manner that upholds the peculiarities of their professional activities, supporting the plurality of their approach (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). The model of liberal professions' professionalization does not align with these requirements, but capacity to underwrite innovation in public regulation might still come.

In conclusion, there is a theoretical problem regarding the professionalization of MCs. They have solved their lack of credentialism by drawing on alternative resources, such as reputational mechanisms and corporate credentialism, measuring their value as professionals in terms of their market success (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Maestripieri, 2013; Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014). However, in order to understand their peculiarity, scholars should go beyond the classical definition of professionalization when analysing knowledge workers. Critically, it is nonsensical to measure MCs' level of professionalism using the same criteria applied in the past to liberal professionals, as long as scopes, addresses, working practices, and even organisational context are so dissimilar (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). Professionalism is not at odds with knowledge workers, and scholars should not persist in trying to fit them in old-fashioned schemes. This work states the call for professionalism (Boussard et al., 2010) played bottom-up by individual actors, relying on market principles and networks. Scholars look to embrace the establishment of a new approach to professionalism based on these principles.

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