



Towards a South African Sociology of Professions

Debby Bonnin & Shaun Ruggunan

To cite this article: Debby Bonnin & Shaun Ruggunan (2013) Towards a South African Sociology of Professions, South African Review of Sociology, 44:2, 1-6, DOI: [10.1080/21528586.2013.802533](https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2013.802533)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2013.802533>



Published online: 14 Jun 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 455



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 7 View citing articles [↗](#)

TOWARDS A SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIOLOGY OF PROFESSIONS

The sociology of professions has not achieved much purchase within South African sociology. The revisionism of the 1970s (see for example Johnson 1976) and what Webster (2004) terms the ‘critical sociology’ of the late 1970s and 1980s took the sociology of work in the direction of engaging with the labour movement (Buhlungu 2009) and studying the conditions of production and reproduction of the black working class (see for example Sitas 1983; Webster 1985; Von Holdt 2003). This does not mean that there is no research on middle class occupations and white collar work – some of the classic studies that come to mind are those of Shula Marks’ book, *Divided Sisterhood*, examining the nursing profession, Blade Nzimande’s doctoral study of black managers (1991), Owen Crankshaw’s book (1997) on race, skill and occupations during apartheid, Leah Gilbert’s numerous studies of community pharmacists (1998a, 1998b, 1998c), and Liz Walker’s pioneering work on white female doctors (2001, 2003, 2005). However, the framing of these studies and the questions they have asked (with the exception of Gilbert’s work) has not resonated with some of the traditional debates concerning the sociology of professions (see Crompton 1990; Evetts 2003). It could be that in a society where so many were denied access to these professions, on the basis of their ‘race’, many sociologists saw such questions as irrelevant; or it could have been the turn to a more public sociology taken by so many sociologists of work (see the discussions by Buhlungu (2009), Burowoy (2004), Webster (2004)); or it could have been that the functionalist paradigm within which much of the sociology of professions operated was rejected by South African sociologists of work (Webster 2004).

Social closure has always been fundamental to any professionalisation project. Historically South African professional occupations have used ‘race’ (and gender) to exclude black South Africans (see Vavi 2012; Walker 2001; 2003; 2005; Webster 2004) from skilled occupations and thus shape the labour market in particular racialised and gendered ways. The apartheid state was central to this project and through various legislation (from labour market to industrial relations to educational to petty apartheid) actively ensured the whiteness of the state bureaucracy and middle class occupations.

We suggest that in post-apartheid South Africa an examination of professional occupations has become increasingly important in assessing the success of the state’s project to ‘deracialise’ the labour market. Furthermore, opening access to professional and expert occupations is vital to ‘growing’ an African (or black) middle class. Traditional professions such as medicine, law, accounting and engineering are still

primarily white, male occupations (see Jawitz et al. 2000; Mulder 2012; Vavi 2012). The historic occupational closure of these professions to black people and women has resulted in racial and gendered skewedness in the composition of these professions. Recent labour market statistics (StatsSA 2012) tell us that 54.8 per cent of those in skilled occupations (managers, professionals and technician occupations) are male, with a higher proportion of male managers (69 per cent) and a higher proportion of female technicians (55.7 per cent). Whites constituted the highest proportion of all racial groups in skilled occupations at 62.6 per cent, Indians follow at 48.2 per cent, while black Africans are the least likely to be employed in high-skilled occupations (16.1 per cent) (StatsSA 2012: 4–15; 4–18).

But quantitative work on labour market compositions does not reveal the full story of how occupational closure takes place. We argue that what is needed are more qualitative studies to demonstrate the complexity of labour market formation, opportunities to enter professions and the ways in which occupational closures take place. The sociology of professions can contribute by providing insights into how professional cultures, professional status and professional labour processes contribute to practices of occupational closure for women, black graduates and others wishing to enter these professions.

A sociology of professions would make a key contribution to the national discourse on professionalism and the need to develop a professional public service culture. A key theme running through the National Development Plan (NDP) (National Planning Commission 2011, see chapters 9, 10, 13 and 14) is the need to build a more professional culture among educators, health workers and public sector workers. While professionalism and professional culture are not explicitly defined in the NDP (professional status, skill, certification and competence seem to be at the heart of its discussion on professionalism), these are related to improving the accountability and service delivery of the state. Thus the NDP correlates effective public service delivery with inculcating a new professionalism (through training) and professional culture among public service workers. On the 8 March 2013, Public Service and Administration minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, taking her cue from the NDP, stated that the state has a vision for a professional public service that does not include cadre deployment (*Daily News* 8 March 2013). A Human Sciences Research Council study (*Daily News* 8 March 2013) shows that only 0.4 per cent of managers employed by the public services have the requisite professional qualifications to effectively practise their jobs. This supports research findings in the Department of Health identifying a lack of professional managerial qualifications in the health sector as a major contributor to lack of public health. A consequence was that 100 hospital chief executives were replaced by candidates with ‘professional’ qualifications. The professional project in this respect is about producing a capable state through a professional project. As sociologists, this new state professional project should be of immense interest as it allows us to interrogate processes and assumptions of what professions, professionals and professional cultures mean in the context of a developmental state.

We believe that a South African Sociology of Professions has much to offer the international literature. Firstly, the literature that examines the emergence of professions and the state's role in professionalisation is dominated by empirical work drawn from a northern context (European, USA and British). Theoretical frameworks are then extrapolated from these empirical examples and presented as normative. Research drawing on southern examples disrupts such a theoretical hegemony and shows that the role played by the modernising enlightenment state or the welfare state is just one trajectory. The colonial or the post-colonial state would have set in place different forces. Secondly, we would suggest that 'race' and gender are key issues of social closure that a South African Sociology of Professions would highlight for an international literature of professions. While race and gender resonate in the existing professions literature, they resonate in different ways in a South African context. For example in South Africa, those who have been racially excluded from professions and high-skilled occupations are in the majority as opposed to being in a minority as in Europe, Australia and North America. Thirdly, in South Africa, the discourse of professionalism extends beyond what has traditionally been seen as expert or high-skill occupations. As the studies by both Faull and Sefalafala and Webster show, many lower-skilled occupations are laying claim to this discourse in an attempt to both gain occupational legitimacy and control access. We would suggest that this strategy is about both increasing status and cornering access to a labour market. These strategies acquire urgency given that so many are denied access to decent work, employment and protection in the labour market. In most cases these examples demonstrate discourses of professionalism both from 'within' as well as from 'above' (Evetts 2011). Furthermore, both the discourse of professionalism and the efforts to professionalise particular occupations, for example traditional healers, speak to the need to legitimate 'traditional' knowledge and occupations that have not previously been recognised by those in authority.

The seven articles that comprise this special issue contribute towards the development of a South African Sociology of Professions and begin to demonstrate the way in which South African research can broaden the Sociology of Professions. The first contributor, ISA Research Committee 52 (Sociology of Professions) President Ellen Kuhlmann, argues for international context-sensitive approaches in both the theorisation and empirical project of sociology of professions. Kuhlmann acknowledges that more work needs to emanate from the global South for a more complete sociology of professions project to emerge. Faull, through his work on the South African police, addresses the broader discussion on professionalisation. He posits questions about professionalism, professional cultures and what these mean in the context of a developmental state. The contribution by Wildschut is concerned with ways in which professions such as medicine become gendered and the implications of this gendering for both attrition rates within the profession as well as for women's qualitative experiences of what it means to be a female doctor (professional cultures). Through this paper she contributes to the broader discussion about the way in which professional discourses are gendered. Gilbert is also concerned with the medical profession within the context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

She provides a revealing case study that assesses arguments made in the sociology of the professions about 'medical dominance', 'occupational monopoly', 'laymanisation' and the ways in which professional dominance and boundaries in medicine shift as medical professions respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa. Sefalafala and Webster examine the limits of the professionalisation project through their case study of security guards in the private security industry. They demonstrate what a professionalisation project from 'above' may look like, showing the opportunities and limitations of such a project. For Ruggunan, the professions are a laboratory in which we can observe how professional status is constructed via work organisation and gender. He argues that constructing professions, such as medicine, as homogeneous hides more than it reveals about intra-professional labour processes and professional status. Finally Bonnin's paper is concerned with the ways in which new technologies combined with globalising supply chains change the work of South African textile designers and contribute to their professional marginalisation. The books reviewed by McKinley give an indication of the work happening in this area. The common thread running through the review of these books is the impact of neoliberal restructuring on public sector delivery and how varied currents of opposition to the privatisation of public services are offering practical, public sector-driven alternatives that have implications for professional work in the public services sector.

In conclusion we would like to note that this is just the beginning of a discussion around 'professions' in South Africa. We were overwhelmed by the number of abstracts we received when advertising this issue. While many of these did not make it to final publication, it is an indication of the research happening in this broad area. Nevertheless there are many gaps in this collection. The most noticeable being a lack of papers addressing the public service. Research in this area would be able to address a multitude of concerns from the nature of the post-apartheid state's professionalisation project to 'professions in organisations'. There is also a need for historical research that documents the professionalisation of occupations in South Africa and the collusions (or lack of) between professional associations and the apartheid state. Finally we need research that examines how, or if, professions and expert occupations continue to monopolise a segment of the labour market for their members and how this interacts with racial and gender exclusivity and dominance. Some of this work is being done. Our plea is that the empirical work is used to engage the Sociology of Professions literature and in turn shape and challenge that literature from a South African/southern perspective. Finally, our thanks to Suveera Singh for her administrative assistance and to the many referees whose comments have assisted in shaping the final product.

DEBBY BONNIN AND SHAUN RUGGUNAN

University of KwaZulu-Natal

bonnin@ukzn.ac.za

ruggunans@ukzn.ac.za

REFERENCES

- Buhlungu, S. 2009. 'South Africa. The Decline of Labor Studies and the Democratic Transition'. *Work and Occupations*, 36(2): 145–161.
- Burawoy, M. 2004. 'Public Sociology: South African Dilemmas in a Global Context'. *Society in Transition*, 35(1): 11–26.
- Crankshaw, O. 1997. *Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour under Apartheid*. London: Routledge.
- Crompton, R. 1990. 'Professions in the Current Context'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 4(5): 147–166.
- Evetts, J. 2003. 'The Sociological Analysis of Professionalism: Occupational Change in the Modern World'. *International Sociology*, 18(2): 395–415.
- Evetts, J. 2011. 'A New Professionalism? Challenges and Opportunities'. *Current Sociology*, 59(4): 406–422.
- Gilbert, L. 1998a. 'Dispensing Doctors and Prescribing Pharmacists – A South African Perspective'. *Social Science & Medicine*, 46: 83–95.
- Gilbert, L. 1998b. 'Pharmacy's Attempts to Extend its Roles – A Case Study of Amendments to Legislation and Special Permit Holders in South Africa'. *Social Science & Medicine*, 47: 153–164.
- Gilbert, L. 1998c. 'Community Pharmacy in South Africa - A Changing Profession in a Society in Transition'. *Health & Place (A Social Science & Medicine Publication)*, 4: 273–285.
- Jawitz, J., Case, J. & Tshabalala, M. 2000. 'Engineers: Why NOT Engineering? The Process of Career Choice amongst South African Female Students'. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 16(6): 470–475.
- Johnson, F. 1976. *Class, Race and Gold. A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Marks, S. 1994. *Divided Sisterhood. Race, Class and Gender in the South African Nursing Profession*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Mulder, C. 2012. 'SAICA drives transformation in Accountancy'. South African Institute of Chartered Accountants Press Release. Retrieved from <https://www.saica.co.za/News/NewsArticlesandPressmediareleases/tabid/695/itemid/3348/language/en-ZA/Default.aspx> (accessed 22 March 2013).
- Nzimande, B. 1991. 'The Corporate Guerillas: Class Formation and the African Corporate Petty Bourgeoisie in Post-1973 South Africa'. PhD dissertation, University of Natal.
- National Planning Commission. 2011. *National Development Plan. Vision for 2030*. Pretoria: National Planning Commission. Retrieved from <http://www.npconline.co.za/medialib/downloads/home/NPC%20National%20Development%20Plan%20Vision%202030%20lo-res.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2012).
- Sitas, A. 1983. 'African Worker Responses on the East Rand to Changes in the Metal Industry, 1960–1980'. PhD thesis, University of Witwatersrand.
- Statistics South Africa. 2012. *Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa, 2011*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

- Vavi, Z. 2012. 'Judiciary still dominated by white males'. Threats to Democracy: Perspectives and Lessons for NADEL. Address by COSATU General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, Mthatha, 25 February 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71654?oid=282327&sn=Detail&pid=71654> (accessed 22 March 2013).
- Von Holdt, K. 2003. *Transition From Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Walker, L. 2001. "'Conservative Pioneers": The Formation of the South African Society of Medical Women'. *Social History of Medicine*, 14(3): 483–505.
- Walker, L. 2003. "'They Heal in the Spirit of the Mother": Gender, Race and Professionalisation of South African Medical Women'. *African Studies*, 62(1): 99–123.
- Walker, L. 2005. 'The Colour White: Racial and Gendered Closure in the South African Medical Profession'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(2): 348–375.
- Webster, E. 1985. *Cast in a Racial Mould. Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Webster, E. 2004. 'Sociology in South Africa: Its Past, Present and Future'. *Society in Transition*, 35(1): 27–41.