Professionalism between Cooperation and Competition

Dominic Boyer,
Department of Anthropology, Rice University
USA

Introduction

My goal in this paper is to develop a discussion of the relationship between competitive and cooperative impulses in contemporary professional practice. I argue that despite the exclusionary social character of professionalism that it is a mistake to assume that competitive social action is the necessary ontology of professional life and practice. I agree that competitive social action is, however, an increasingly enhanced feature of professional life in our current era of globalized market-liberalism. In order to achieve a better balance between competitive and cooperative impulses, I argue that we need to develop more deliberately reflexive and 'open' modes of professional practice. To this end, I discuss recent experiments in research design and training emerging from the anthropology of experts as one example of how cooperative inter-professional relations and exchanges could be developed and stabilized institutionally.

Whatever we wish to make of professionalism, we must first admit that professionalism is, to a great extent, an exclusionary social practice. To cite the sociologist of professions, Andrew Abbott, the "defining relation" of professionalism is jurisdiction and the work of professionalism is the creation and maintenance of specialized domains of skill and knowledge (1998:3). Jurisdiction is itself, in its legal sense of authority over a subject or space, an exclusionary relationship, a marking of the boundary between the few who hold authority over a given sphere and the many who do not. The principle of jurisdiction constitutes in turn "the expert" as the personification of its exclusionary social authority. The expert is the figure who is imagined to hold a certain monopoly of authority over a specific jurisdictional domain of skill or knowledge. In this respect, expertise emerges as the idealized form of professional life and it is possible to speak therefore of professional "cultures of expertise" (Holmes and Marcus 2004). The idealization and culturing of expertise tends to allow exclusionary

principles to define and to saturate the practices and institutions of professional life. Thus far, these points are quite unremarkable.

What is not as obvious is whether the exclusionary basis of professionalism naturally fosters a situation of competitive social action. This is the assumption of a great many brilliant theories of professionalism and expertise, not least the Marxian theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1988) and Magali Larson (1977). And, indeed, it is very easy to see how one would arrive at the assumption that the jurisdictional character of professionalism would inevitably act to generate competition (1) intra-professionally, in the routine struggles over social reproduction and authority in particular expert fields that Bourdieu has so brilliantly depicted and in such depth (2) inter-professionally, among the cultures of expertise over which one should maintain legitimate authority over given spheres of skill and knowledge (Boyer, 2008), and (3) trans-professionally, in a broader societal struggle of the expert castes to assert authority over the general public (e.g., technocracy).

While I agree we must take the competitive impulses of professionalism very seriously, I suggest that we need to recognize that professionalism has strong cooperative impulses as well. I argue here that we can develop strategies to help foster cooperative impulses, but that doing so will require advocacy for more reflexive and open institutions and practices of professionalism than are typical, especially in our era of globalized market-oriented (neo)liberalism. First, I will discuss the competitive and cooperative impulses of professionalism in more detail and then turn toward recent experimental practice in the anthropology of experts to suggest one concrete model for how professionalism's exclusionary tendencies can be refunctioned to create mutually-beneficial cooperative projects.

The competitive impulse

As I have written elsewhere, there is a "phenomenology of expertise" at work in professional cultures that encourages the experiential centering of core jurisdictions of specialized skill and knowledge in professional lives and worldviews (2005). This phenomenology is generated through the acquisition of specialized skills and knowledge and although the decision to pursue a professional career may well be voluntary or semi-voluntary the acquisition of a phenomenology of expertise is less so, much as Marx and Engels describe how the "fixation of social activity" implied in the division and specialization of labor (1932) produces a certain

enslavement to the specialized forms of that labor. Expertise comes to be, like it or not, the lens through which professionals view the world and the method through which they analyze and evaluate the world's dynamics. Expertise is, in a very real way, the medium and habitus of a professional's life and practice. This shared phenomenology of expertise constitutes a large percentage of what Bourdieu describes as the *esprit de corps* professional cultures demand of their members as the license to participate in a professional field (1988). One could think of the conditioned phenomenological investment in expertise as the *esprit de corps* of professionalism more generally.

At the same time, the phenomenology of expertise enables a plurality of specific jurisdictional ideologies of expertise, with each of culture of expertise tending to imagine that its own jurisdictional domain is more important than others. This is particularly true among the "intellectual professions" (professions in which skilled forms of knowing take precedence over skilled forms of doing, for example in academia or law) and we all likely recognize how habitual it is to dismiss entire fields of professional intellectual activity as suffering from a constitutionally inferior or inadequate form of expertise. We should view this tendency as part of the effort to stabilize jurisdictional centers and peripheries in practice, which tends to lead to both the overestimation of the significance of one's own domain and the underestimation of other, particularly neighboring, domains. For, even strong institutionalization (e.g., state legitimation of professional authority) does not preclude recognition of how the fluid, dynamic, plural character of human knowledge consistently threatens the stabilization of jurisdictions. If, for example, the jurisdictional imagination of professional anthropology once was centered on the study of "culture," the field has become increasingly aware in the past thirty years that forms of cultural expertise inhabit a great many other intellectual professions. This has led to great debates over the adequacy of the culture concept in anthropology (which are very often anxious ruminations on the security of anthropology's jurisdictional expertise) and to a general move to shift our jurisdictional center from theory into method (e.g., fieldwork and ethnography).

Recognition of the vulnerability, or simply contingency, of jurisdictions certainly sets the stage for aggressive and competitive social action, especially in inter-professional relations as noted above. I have written elsewhere of how the practice of "epistemophagy" (the appropriation and refunctioning of epistemic techniques belonging to other expert cultures) becomes a vital method for shoring a profession's ideological center against the oceanic flux of knowledge specialization and

its concomitant jurisdictional rivalries (Boyer, 2008). Cultures of expertise routinely encroach upon one another, invading peripheries, challenging jurisdictions, "borrowing" techniques and then putting them to work for new purposes, clients and audiences. Epistemophagy is utilized for innovation and generational reproduction and but most importantly for sustaining the ideological illusion that one culture of expertise can condense within itself the entirety of human specialized skill and knowledge (and naturally do this better than any other culture could). There is, of course, also a certain entente cordiale among professions and professionals, a certain mutual respect for caste status. But beneath the entente, one can see not only the enormous potential for competition among the cultures of expertise but also the empirical reality of a great deal of energy invested into competitive forms of social action.

Finally, we must take into account the historicity of the contemporary moment. Professionalism in the era of global market-oriented liberalism is perhaps more susceptible to the competitive impulse than ever. That is to say, even though certain modes of competition and rivalry have been endemic to cultures of expertise since the medieval guilds (e.g., the competition of apprentices for the favor of masters), the globalization of market-centered reforms, institutions and discourse since the 1970s has tended to center the significance and validity of competitive (market) performance and success in matters of professional social reproduction. Marketization, it has often been observed, tends to encourage an austere view of social relations focused on the exchange of goods and services rather than on other kinds of human relatedness and mutual obligation (e.g., kin ties or patronage relations). Marketization, in this respect, reinforces a liberal imaginary of sovereign rights-bearing individuality maximally freed of social responsibility beyond the level of the family. Although guild-like corporational and fraternal bonds certainly remain important to contemporary cultures of expertise, in recent decades social reproduction and advancement have been increasingly subjected to abstract criteria of performance or "excellence," whether through the direct pressure of bureaucratic "audit culture" (Strathern, 2000) or through the indirect pressure of expanding labor markets brought about in turn by the massification of public higher education in the postwar period. In both cases, the re-imagination of the professional culture as a market "field" and the concomitant valorization of market performance, has enhanced intra-professional competitiveness and undermined, to a certain degree, professional solidarity. That is to say, professional solidarity is less the brother/sisterhood of craft, less even the shared guild-like privilege of a jurisdictional elite and more the solidarity of competitive players in the

Bourdieuian illusio, the social game at the heart of marketized professional life (Bourdieu, 1992).

The cooperative impulse

But there is an important sense in which the illusio is itself an ontological illusion generated by an increasing marketized regime of professionalism. That competitive fields exist within professionalism there can be no doubt. But that competition represents an immanent "logic of practice" for professionalism does not therefore follow. It is very important that we do not ignore the parallel existence of intra-professional, inter-professional, and trans-professional cooperative impulses in cultures of expertise as well. This recognition is already an old one. Some decades after Marx offered his scathing indictment of the division and specialization of labor as the engine of human alienation, Durkheim reimagined the division of labor as driven by the effort, with increasing population density, to minimize conflict through the innovation and specialization of tasks that would less often bring social actors into direct competition with one another. The preface to the second edition of *De la division du travail social* contains a wonderful paean to the professional group as a means of remediating the growing dissociative anomie within European societies, where "an extremely large mass of unorganized individuals" confront "an overgrown state" in the context of increasingly abstract, disconnected and dangerous nationalism (1984:liv). By contrast, Durkheim wrote, "what we particularly see in the professional grouping is a moral force capable of curbing individual egotism, nurturing among workers a more invigorated feeling of their common solidarity, and preventing the law of the strongest from being applied too brutally in industrial and commercial relationships" (xxxix). Durkheim thus reverses the Marxian image of the estranged, competitive profession, emphasizing instead the fundamental forms of solidarity which emerge as a result of common practice and the possibility that these forms and norms may even lead to stronger societal bonds, providing that Society is viewed more as a loose-knit archipelago of professions ("secondary groupings" in Durkheim's language) rather than as a bounded nation-state containing a mass of sovereign, anomic individuals.

It is not necessary to view society as a sui generis phenomenon as Durkheim did to confirm his essential insight that professional solidarity is a very efficacious force and one that shapes social action within cultures of expertise at least as much as individualistic motives. This is perhaps clearest in the case of intra-professional action, where we are doubtless quite aware of how the common experience of training and institutional life, the

common spaces and routines of social activity, the common languages and ways of knowing of professional expertise, the common aspirations and anxieties of professional life all contribute powerfully to senses of shared identity and purpose. Although Bourdieu is right to recognize the importance of competitive motives even in the most seemingly innocent actions and judgments, I believe he is wrong to assume that professional cooperation is motivated by nothing other than situational self-interest and that professional solidarity is simply a orthodox fiction perpetuated by successful players who wish to dominate the expert market/field with their symbolic capital. The labors of social reproduction that concern Bourdieu so greatly are a good case in point. Matters of professional training and apprenticeship are equivalently self-interested and selfless in my view. Self-interested perhaps in the master's hope that his apprentice will eventually help to extend his labor power, his political influence or his fame. But selfless in the sense that apprenticeship is ultimately a transfer of social power across generations, precisely a matter of *reproduction*, that is, a repayment of one's own apprenticeship as much as an extension of one's own social power. It seems clear to me that co-professionals invest a great deal of energy in one another (in forms of talk, free labor, networking, for example) none of which could be interpreted as motivated by pure self-interest (which I reiterate is not to say that self-interest does not adhere). There are genuine affective bonds, caring relations and cooperative sensibilities within professionalism that exist alongside the more frequently depicted relations of individual desires for social power and domination. I feel that the latter depictions amount to the alibi of our market-liberal era that the rising competitiveness we sense within professionalism today amounts to a transhistorical ontologic of professional life. Accepting such ontology is convenient in that it relieves us of any responsibility for our role in the perpetuation of present conditions and it exempts us from the burden of trying to imagine and to institutionalize alternatives to these conditions.

What we need, if I may be blunt, is not ontology but rather reflexive awareness. Since I obviously do not accept that competitive social action is the ontology of professional life, I must thus accept the burden of addressing how things might be different. The real challenge, to my mind, is not the acknowledgement of the cooperative impulse in professional life but rather how to foster this cooperative impulse in specific institutional projects. This is a complicated task especially given the contemporary incentives for and legitimacy of competitive social action. In the final section of this paper I will offer a brief case study of reflexive professionalism drawn from my own culture of expertise, anthropology, and describe how recent experimental research in reflexive anthropology has developed at least one

very intriguing model for fostering inter-professional collaboration between anthropologists and their research partners.

Para-ethnographic exchange as a mode of cooperative inter-professionalism

Anthropology has endured a long phase of reflexive criticism of its methods of research and representation dating back to the late 1960s. One of the key concerns of this criticism has been traditional anthropology's exploitation of unequal relations of power and knowledge in order to accomplish its ethnographic and theoretical objectives. A recent response to this dilemma, emerging not incidentally from anthropological research among cultures of expertise, has been to develop new methods of anthropological training and research design that seek to rebalance anthropological research relations into a more collaborative mode.

Douglas Holmes and George Marcus's work on "para-ethnography" (2004) and "epistemic partnership" (2008) is one of the most extensive examples of this response. "Para-ethnography" is a concept designating the reflexive ethnographic awareness that exists more or less explicitly in other cultures of expertise and bureaucratic-institutional settings. The authors argue that the recognition of para-ethnographic knowledge can set the stage for projects of epistemic partnership to share ethnographic and reflexive insights valuable for both the professional ethnographer and the expert practitioner (for a parallel discussion of the existence and significance of "para-theory" see Boyer, 2010). Holmes and Marcus highlight the danger of ignoring the para-ethnographic, even para-anthropological, modes of knowledge circulating among our research interlocutors as well as the opportunity that such knowledge affords anthropological research in terms of gaining deeper insight into the processes of knowledge-formation in other cultures of expertise. Their position is that there is more to be gained from treating our interlocutors not simply as data-delivering "informants" and more as collaborative "allies" or "partners" in processes of ethnographic exploration, analysis and representation (also Westbrook, 2008).

Holmes and Marcus argue that anthropologists should not underestimate the extent to which experts' (or others') reflexive awareness to their ways of knowing and forms of life could helpfully co-inform our own research process just as the research intervention may offer our partners a much-needed excuse for self-reflection, feedback and experimental reconfigurations of their own. In my own research experience, I have found that the para-ethnographic awareness of journalists both to their own

professional contingencies as well as to the difficulties of social analysis and representation have been immensely instructive, representing a kind of second graduate education for me in ethnography and social theory. At the same time, my ethnographic work of research and social analysis has generally been welcomed by my journalistic partners as a kind of "para-journalism" that operates as a gathering and discussion point for their own reflexive attentions to their professional activity. This dual commitment to temporarily suspending the habitus of everyday professional ideology in order to listen to Lévi-Straussian "other messages" issuing from neighboring cultures of expertise seems to me a much better and indeed more ethical model of anthropological knowledge-making than the aforementioned "epistemophagy" in which one culture of expertise is permitted simply to absorb another's epistemic techniques without the demand or expectation of reflexive transformation in the process.

Via his Center for Ethnography Initiative at the University of California-Irvine (http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~ethnog/), Marcus has worked over the past five years to develop experiments in research design and pedagogy that will convert recognition of the importance of para-ethnographic knowledge into positive projects of anthropological research and training. The most advanced of these experiments has been a modular research and pedagogical intervention that Marcus terms the "para-site."

The Irvine Center's online charter for the para-site explains: "In the absence of formal norms of method covering these de facto and intellectually substantive relations of partnership and collaboration in many contemporary projects of fieldwork, we would like to encourage, where feasible, events in the Center that would blur the boundaries between the field site and the academic conference or seminar room. … We are terming this overlapping academic/fieldwork space in contemporary ethnographic projects a para-site. It creates the space outside conventional notions of the field in fieldwork to enact and further certain relations of research essential to the intellectual or conceptual work that goes on inside such projects. It might focus on developing those relationships, which in our experience have always informally existed in many fieldwork projects, whereby the ethnographers finds subjects with whom he or she can test and develop ideas (these subjects have not been the classic key informants as such, but the found and often uncredited mentors or muses who correct mistakes, give advice, and pass on interpretations as they emerge)."

As Marcus has more recently explained, one of the key motivations for developing the para-site was to "find ways of doing theory in continuous

relation to the distinctly non-meta- immersive quality of thinking during fieldwork" (Deeb & Marcus N.d.:40). The para-site is thus a kind of deliberate experimental interruption or "disruption" in the field research process with the intent of staging a reflexive (and potentially collaborative) encounter between research partners: "It embraces the opportunity to deal in unsettled working concepts, analytic strategies, and ethnographic ways of thinking that the fieldworker may appropriate critically for her own eventual individual purposes." Moreover, "para-sites thus can be seen as precociously enacting collaborative norms in the conduct of fieldwork that still tends to be conceived canonically in professional culture as individually conducted and reported" (9). The para-site thus (ideally) creates a foundation in graduate pedagogy for the early enactment of cooperative norms and practices. Research "subjects" are turned into research "partners" and the process of investigation and anthropological knowledge-making is pushed to become a collaborative partnership in which the para-anthropological knowledge and reflexive awareness of the research partner is allowed to co-inform the process of anthropological research design at the level of articulating research questions, defining methods of data acquisition and analysis, and refining the objects and strategies of ethnographic representation. Although admittedly still in its early stages, the para-site experiment has already generated impressive results, including fascinating studies of the World Trade Organization (Deeb & Marcus N.d.) and European Central Bankers (Holme, 2009) in which the epistemic outcomes have exceeded what either group of partners would have been able to achieve on their own.

The lesson I believe that we can take from this recent turn in the anthropological engagement of cultures of expertise is that it is possible for cultures of expertise to collaboratively identify zones of shared jurisdiction that then can serve as the basis for cooperative partnerships in knowledge-making and communication. The para-site experiment falls short of institutionalizing full-blown jurisdictional partnerships to be sure. Yet, if we are interested in strategies for fostering the cooperative impulse in professionalism, I believe that it points us in the right direction for further initiatives. The reliance of professions upon exclusionary domains of expertise will endure. But so will the existence of zones in which more than one profession will lay claim to the same specialized skills and knowledge. For example, journalism and anthropology do much the same work of translocal social representation and analysis but have generally proven themselves very unwilling to recognize and to positively value each other's contributions to this domain (Hannerz 1998, 2003). The para-site teaches us that it is nevertheless possible to successfully negotiate collaborative inter-

professional relations even in these sensitive zones in which partners share common specialized skill and knowledge. Instead of following incentives to compete over jurisdictional boundaries, however, they can find ways to amicably and productively cooperate in these zones with the understanding of a flexible and dynamic "epistemic partnership."

Epistemic partnership suggests a new ethics of inter-professional exchange where the cooperative impulse is allowed to control the competitive impulse rather than vice-versa. These ethics are, to my mind, entirely worth pursuing into projects of institutionalization, especially given the extraordinary pressure of market-liberalism to define professional life as foundationally individualistic and competitive. But, I would emphasize that pursuing such partnerships requires, in the first place, an open and intensive reflexive attitude toward one's own culture of expertise. One needs to work actively and critically (1) to de-ontologize ideologies and worldviews of expertise in which any one jurisdiction and any one profession is imagined to constitute an "imperial" center of skill and knowledge and (2) to resist the common wisdom among both practitioners and analysts that professional relations will inevitably follow competitive rather than cooperative impulses. I view the sociology and anthropology of knowledge as powerful allies in this project but I do not think that inter-professional cooperation is a narrowly academic problem. If we believe that Durkheim was indeed correct that the professional group has become an essential organ and connective tissue in modern society, then how we should imagine, manage and institutionalize the relations between professional groups should be a matter of general social concern. I believe that the collaborative exploration of zones of shared jurisdiction has been an immensely important if often hidden aspect of the development of modern professionalism. It needs now to be fully surfaced and made a reflexive ethical orientation for present and future professional action. This is, if you will, my manifesto for restoring the cooperative impulse to its proper place in professional life. Good fences, to invert the American proverb, do not always make good neighbours.

References:

Abbott, A. (1988). *The System of Professions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1988) *Homo Academicus*. [Translated by P. Collier.] Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1992). *The Logic of Practice*. [Translated by R. Nice.] Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Boyer, D. (2005). *Spirit and System.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Boyer, D. (2008). Thinking through the Anthropology of Experts. *Anthropology in Action* 15(2):38-46.
Boyer, D. (2010) On the ethics and practice of contemporary social theory: from crisis talk to multiattentional method. *Dialectical Anthropology*.
Deeb, H. and Marcus, G. E. N.d. The WTO as Para-Site: Seeking Illumination in the Green Room. Unpublished Ms.
Durkheim, E. (1984). *The Division of Labor in Society.* [Translated by W.D. Halls.] New York: Free Press.
Hannerz, U. (1998). Other Transnationals: Perspectives Gained from Studying Sideways. Paideuma 44:109-123.
Hannerz, U. (2003). Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Holmes, Douglas. (2009). Economy of Words. CulturalAnthropology 24(3):381–419.
Holmes, D and Marcus, G. E. (2008). Collaboration Today and the Re-Imagination of the Classic Scene of Fieldwork Encounter. Collaborative Anthropologies 1:81–101.
Holmes, D. and Marcus, G.E. (2004) Cultures of Expertise and the Management of Globalization: Toward the Re-Functioning of Ethnography. In Global Assemblages, eds. A. Ong and S. Collier. New York: Blackwell.
Larson, Magali Sarfatti. (1977). The Rise of Professionalism. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Marx, K, and Friedrich E. (1932).Die deutsche Ideologie. In Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe, I(5), ed. V. Adoratskij. Berlin: Marx-Engels Verlag.
Strathern, M. ed. (2000). Audit Cultures. London: Routledge.
Westbrook, D. (2008). Navigators of the Contemporary. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.