Professions

What occupations are professions? Although sociologists do not always agree on exactly which occupations are professions, they do agree that the number of people categorized as "professionals" has grown dramatically since World War II. According to sociologist Steven Brint (1994), the contemporary professional middle class includes most doctors, natural scientists, engineers, computer scientists, certified public accountants, economists, social scientists, psychotherapists, lawyers, policy experts of various sorts, professors, at least some journalists and editors, some clergy, and some artists and writers.

Characteristics of Professions

Professions are high status, knowledge‐based occupations that have five major characteristics (Freidson, 1970, 1986; Larson, 1977):

1. Abstract, specialized knowledge. Professionals have abstract, specialized knowledge of

their field, based on formal education and interaction with colleagues. Education

provides the credentials, skills, and training that allow professionals to have job

opportunities and to assume positions of authority within organizations (Brint, 1994).

2. Autonomy. Professionals are autonomous in that they can rely on their own judgment

in selecting the relevant knowledge or the appropriate technique for dealing with a

problem. Consequently, they expect patients, clients, or students to respect that

autonomy.

3. Self‐regulation. In exchange for autonomy, professionals theoretically are self‐

regulating. All professions have licensing, accreditation, and regulatory associations that

set professional standards and that require members to adhere to a code of ethics as a

form of public accountability.

4. Authority. Because of their authority, professionals expect compliance with their

directions and advice. Their authority is based on mastery of the body of specialized

knowledge and on their profession's autonomy: professionals do not expect the client

to argue about the professional advice rendered. Professionals also have authority over

persons in subordinate occupations; for example, doctors control much of the work of

nurses and others in the health‐care field.

5. Altruism. Ideally, professional’s have concern for others. The term Altruism implies

some degree of self‐sacrifice whereby professionals go beyond self‐interest or personal

comfort so that they can help a patient or client (Hodson and Sullivan, 1990).

Professionals also have a responsibility to protect and enhance their knowledge and to

use it for the public interest.