

"Le nuove frontiere della sociologia economica"

Sessione 14: *Professioni e Professionalismo: nuove sfide per la sociologia economica*

Title of the proposal: ***Fragmented fields. Multiple professionalisms within and beyond organisation in Italian management consultancy.***

In the recent years, there has been a transformation in the way the knowledge work is considered, above all when we focus our attention on the boundaries between the professions inside the organizations (i.e. management) and what is outside (i.e. freelance professionals). Usually considered irreconcilable, organizations and professionalism have started to build new forms, new strategies and new cultures in order to communicate with each other. Such progressive hybridization puts in question the traditional assumption by which intellectual work within organisations is proletarianized or deprofessionalized, while it favours the construction of a professional and organisational culture at the same time, which uses the organisation as a new space of dialogue (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2011). Starting from a critic of the traditional approach to professions, in this paper I would like to propose an analysis on the **practices of hybridization between professions and organizations**.

Management consultancy is a privileged field in which one observes hybridisation's processes: even if it is a job that started consolidated in the industrial society, in the last three decades it benefited from a robust growth due to the increasing demands of advanced business services and it has become one of the most emblematic knowledge work's activities. The consulting services offered by management consultants are paradigmatic forms of the contemporary model of work organising, as long as consultancy's activities are based on projectification, on immateriality, on the globalisation of the biggest corporation of the sector and on the strategic use of knowledge.

Stemming from individual and institutional factors, I propose an investigation of how workers account their professional career and how do they report their experience of being a management consultant. The main **research questions** to investigate are: are consultants recognising themselves as professionals? And if yes, what are the consequences of positioning as consultants in shaping their professional project? Is the reference to organisation relevant in this process? This paper contributes to answer these questions by proposing an analysis based on **55 in-depth interviews with management consultants in Italy**, in which I use the techniques of biographical trajectories (Olagnero, Saraceno, 1993) and of positioning (Bamberg, 1997). The **methodological approach** is of particular interest as it combines narrative techniques, such as positioning, with the analysis of the biographical trajectories in the careers of consultants. The process, however, respects the inner narrative dimension of the research by giving back the results in forms of exemplary narrations. The outcome is represented by four idealtypical biographical trajectories illustrated by exemplary narrations: those paths represent ideal-typical forms of professionalization's process, as the way practitioners become management consultants and perform their work.

Results show the contemporaneous presence of multiple trajectories, as it usually happens in occupations such as management consulting that lack a clearly defined social status. Different biographical trajectories, however, underline different perspectives in defining the professional projects of consultants. The types are the following:

- the *SELF-Employed*, those that give priority to independent work while the activity provided depend on market's request. Consultancy is just one among other services offered to clients, which can be changed according to convenience;

- the *unwilling*, those who arrive in consultancy in the second phase of their career and who have choose this profession as a second-best after being expelled from management;
- the yuppie, those ambitious young who decide to invest time and effort in consultancy in the first part of their career as it is the quickest way to reach managerial positions;
- the professional consultant, professionals who start as professionals and want to remain such in the long-term.

In the paper I identify different biographical trajectories stemming from two fundamental dimensions. From one side, the first criterion is to identify the direction of the professional project of the interviewee. The projects, which are necessarily different in content, were grouped into two regarding their goals, namely permanence in the profession of management consultant or transition through consultancy to gain access to another profession (manager or other professional activities). The second dimension makes direct reference to the argumentations used by interviewees to justify their claims, through their positioning in opposition/similarity to relevant characters. The two main positioning models used by interviewees were the professional and the manager, both considered as possible identities to be assumed by consultants during their career since they share many similarities in their working modalities.

The theoretical approach of organisational professionalism offers the possibility to investigate differences in professional identities, problematizing the issues of boundaries within and outside organisations. The exemplary narrations explain how consultants claim hybridised professionalism by showing the constant reference of consultants with an organisation, something relevant in three of the main idealtypes I've identified. The sole exception could be the SELF-employed professionals: although they base their own identity on the autonomy from any form of organization, they are quite often the promoter and/or owner of own small businesses. In the way consultants perceive their professionalism, the formal and institutional membership to intermediate corps, like orders, bars, professional associations and trade unions, are not relevant and they don't intervene in the definition of their positioning. In fact, the professional identity of management consultants emerges in positioning toward managers and professionals mainly; organisational and individual professional practices are thus both relevant to understand their activities, while the role of peers mediated by associations is less important.

The focus of consultants' identity work is above all represented by a reflexivity process on their professional contents and on the construction of an individual career, which is coherent with the organisation in which they work. The organization is also the privileged space in which the informal community of management consultants exchange ideas within peers and socialize new members to the profession.

This paper illustrates the main outcomes of the **PhD project** of the proponent.

Keywords: professionalism, hybridization, management consultancy