

Polarization of Professionals? Class Analysis of Job Control in an Emergent “Knowledge Economy”

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Abstract

The literature on professionals is full of contending claims about the professionalization of the contemporary labour force versus the proletarianization of professional work. Two points are clear: first, the economic class structure of advanced capitalist economies has been shifting in recent decades with the decline of traditional working classes and growth of professional and managerial positions (Livingstone and Scholtz, 2016); secondly, prior research on professional occupations has conflated four distinct class positions relevant to professionalization and proletarianization claims: *professional employers; self-employed professionals; professional managers; and professional employees* (see Livingstone 2014). This paper focuses on a comparative analysis of these four professional classes and particularly on change and continuity in their differential job control. The analysis is based on a series of national surveys in Canada conducted between 1982 and 2016, and supplemented by recent surveys and in-depth interviews with engineers and nurses.

Introduction

Professional and managerial occupations have both become increasingly prevalent in advanced capitalist economies. Some analysts have argued that the professional-managerial class is becoming more influential in knowledge economies (Bell, 1973; Ehrenreichs, 1977). Others have suggested that as professionals have become more common and bureaucratized, their relative influence has diminished and they have become proletarianized or de-professionalized, more similar to traditional working-class employees (Derber et al., 1990; Coburn 1994). Others now note two contrasting forms of professionalism in knowledge base-economies: organizational professionalism which is a form of regulation and control of professionals work by a managerial hierarchy, versus occupational professionalism by which collegial groups of professionals primarily exercise their own discretionary judgement and regulate themselves guided by collegial codes of practice (e.g. Evetts, 2013, p. 788). Still others have observed increasing hybrid professional managerial roles (e.g. Noordegraaf, 2007).

The basic argument of this paper is that, particularly under the impact of globalization, automation and credential proliferation, the job control of the growing numbers of professionals

in different class positions has experienced divergent trends. The increasing number of employers with professional qualifications can use their specialized knowledge claims to enhance their ownership power over their employees. Self-employed professionals have more diminished power as more of them are compelled to sub-contract their services to more concentrated larger corporations. As the managerial hierarchy has expanded, most managers except those at the very top are likely to have lost relative power with lower titular managers having most constrained and ambiguous supervisory roles. Professional employees are becoming more like traditional working-class employees in terms of job control as the distinctiveness of their specialized knowledge claims diminishes. Both professionalization and proletarianization theses and subsequent contrasting models and hybrid perspectives are misleading unless they are seen in the context of these professional classes in advanced capitalism.

Growth of Professional Occupations and Professional Classes

The distribution of occupations in the Canadian employed labour force changed significantly from the early 1980s to the present. As summarized in Table 1, professional and managerial occupations made up around a quarter of the labour force in 1982, increasing to about half by 2016. The increasing proportion professional occupations based on specialized knowledge has

labour force. In addition to upper managers who control a plant, branch or division of an entire organization, this includes middle and lower managers, supervisors and forepersons. Middle and lower managers appear to have increased the most, now making up over half of all managerial employees.

Table 2 General Class Distribution, Employed Labour Force, Canada, 1982-2016 (%)

General class location	Employment class	1982	1998	2004	2010	2016
Owners						
	Large/small employer	3	6	6	5	4

minority of the entire employed labour force. Clerical, sales and service workers have declined somewhat since the 1980s but still make up around a quarter of the employed labour force. The declining numbers of industrial workers may now be smaller than the growing numbers of professional employees.

Overall, non-

When we look at the distribution of professional classes over this period, professional employers and self-employed professional business owners together remained at around 15 percent of all professional occupations, very similar to the proportion of owners in the general labour force. The proportions of professional managers remained around one quarter, and professional employees remained the majority (around 55 percent) of all professional occupations. So, while the distribution of professional classes per se was fairly constant in this period, the proportions in each of the general class positions with claims to specialized professional knowledge grew significantly. One implication is that professional employees are becoming more prone to overarching control by employers and managers who have their own

and growing numbers of managers gain more access to their increasingly computerized specialized knowledge. Conversely, the declining numbers of industrial and service workers are increasingly doing less manual labour than previously and more machine-mediating mental labour with increasing levels of formal education and at least a sense that they have more choices than in standardized mass production processes.

Table 4 summarizes the extent to which respondents from the different professional classes, as well as service and industrial workers, perceive that they can plan and design their own work. Nearly all professional employers continue to perceive exclusive control over their own work, consistent with their ownership prerogative over their own firms. There appears to have been some decline from unanimity in self-employed professionals sense of planning control as growing proportions have sub-contracted their services to other businesses and become de-facto employees. (National survey data suggests an increase from a quarter to over a third of income of self-employed coming from wages and salaries since 1998.)

Table 4 Plan or design own work ``all or most of time``, Professional Classes and Other Non-managerial Workers, Employed Canadian Labour Force, 1982-2016 (% plan most)

Employment Class	1982	2004	2010	2016
Professional employer	-*-	89	-*-	92
Self-emp. professional	100	77	78	70
Professional manager	93	79	82	70
-- Professional supervisor	90	66	63	53
Professional employee	75	61	64	53
All professionals	78	67	69	58

Table 6 Plan or design own work ``all or most of time``, Professional Classes of Engineers and Nurses, Ontario, 2017 (% plan most)

Professional Class	Engineers	Nurses
Professional employer	100	100
Self-emp. professional	93	58
Professional manager	74	53
Professional employee	61	43
Overall average	85	57
N (all professionals)	513	962

Sources: CWKE 2017.

While there are significant general differences between engineers and nurses in extent of planning control of work, differences between professional employers, self-employed professionals, professional managers and professional employees appear to be even greater and should not be conflated or ignored in further research on professional occupations generally or engineers and nurses in particular.

Some further insight into the sense of planning control of those in different professional classes is provided by the comments of engineers and nurses in recent in-depth interviews.

A self-employed engineering consultant feels he retains full control but is concerned about loss of respect from clients:

the technical experts to come up with an honest estimate. And now there seems to be a lot
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Upper level managers typically also express continuing confidence in their capacity to plan their own work but with growing concern about increasing bureaucracy or workload pressure:

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professional employers and some upper-level managers; and, increasing proletarianization for the relatively large numbers of professional employees and most lower level professional managers, as well increasingly constrained self-employed professionals.

The surveys of engineers and nurses serve to point out important differences in class distribution of professionals in different occupational fields and the fact that levels of job control may differ greatly between class positions within the same profession. As noted previously, organizational size, private or public sector, and association memberships are other potentially important

Livingstone, D. W. (1999). Exploring the Icebergs of Adult Learning: Findings of the First