CHAPTER 6

Sociological Perspectives on the Nature of Expertise

Andrew Sturdy, Innes Newman, and Peter Nichollss

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to review some of the principal sociological perspectives on the nature of expertise and to highlight the partiality of these perspectives. Thus, the discussion is not concerned with the sociology of knowledge in the tradition of Kuhn (1962) or Habermas (1971) or Foucault (1970). Nor is the intention to explore all relevant theories with the aim of reaching some conclusive outcome on the nature of expertise. Rather, the objective is to suggest a way forward for developing a theoretical framework as a tool for understanding the nature of expertise as it is practiced. To this end, empirical data are presented.

The following discussion is divided into three parts. Firstly, the structural theoretical perspectives are explored. This includes a presentation of the commonsense or functionalist view of the role of experts and demonstrates the way in which sociologists might question this understanding of expertise. Here, attention is drawn to prevalent alternative perspectives which focus on societal power relationships.

In the second part, these structural perspectives are critically examined by employing a subjectivist approach to analyze empirical data from a study of the role of management consultants (MCs) as purveyors of expertise in the commercial context. In this exploration of the relationships between MCs and their

Andrew Sturdy, Innes Newman, and Peter Nicholls • Bristol Business School, Coldharbour Lane, Frenchay, Bristol BS16 1QY, England.


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clients, the focus is the subject which receives relatively little attention within structural perspectives and becomes lost in either the structure or process of society.

Finally, by revealing expertise in action, the chapter concludes by questioning the claims and practice of "experts," contends the concepts of expertise as technical rational or "rule-based" phenomena, and suggests a direction for theoretical development on the nature of expertise.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

One commonsense notion of expertise is grounded in expectations of a relatively long formal educational process combined with years of practical experience where theoretical knowledge and learning-on-the-job are synthesized as they are applied. Here, expertise is not prey to personal predilections because it is viewed as objective, measurable, and even scientific in nature. There is, then, a sense in which expertise is felt to be detached from persons who, or occupations which, profess to own it. Indeed, in functionalist theories, expertise is considered to serve a positive function in society whereby experts are the vehicle through which this function is delivered (for example, Parsons, 1954). Maintaining the efficient functioning of society requires observance of a status quo insofar as expertise must be recognized, certified, and practiced. This is reflected in social stratification where occupational experts, often referred to as professionals, reside in upper strata and are commensurately accredited with higher prestige, status, and financial rewards (for example, Bottomore, 1965).

For example, the medical profession possesses a particular expertise. For practitioners, accumulating this expertise requires years of theoretical study based on scientific rules and procedures. Complementary periods of guided application of this theoretical knowledge precede the testing and certification of medical expertise. With respect to certification, the individual is bestowed with the right to practice medicine. Medical expertise functions to maintain the health and welfare of citizens, thus, medical practitioners are the vehicle through which this function is delivered within society. To writers in the functionalist tradition, it is no coincidence that medical experts are highly respected and well paid because, it is argued, this is indicative of the value that society places on the those who profess medical expertise and of the years of sacrifice required to attain the mandatory credentials. Indeed, much orthodox functionalist analysis has focused on the nature or attributes of experts rather than on expertise.

The isolation of attributes peculiar to occupational groups recognized as experts or professionals has been a concern of orthodox sociological analysis (Klegon, 1978). For example, from a review of various taxonomies, Millerson (1964) listed: (1) skills based on theoretical or abstract knowledge; and (2) an