Covid-19 and The Study of Professionals and Professional Work

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The Covid-19 global pandemic changes how we study professional workers and their everyday lives. We normally think of professionals as leading stable, secure, and independent work lives. The pandemic has made life more challenging for them. Increased workloads and economic uncertainties; the stresses and demands caused by an abrupt juxta positioning of work with non-work life; greater risks and safety concerns at work; new ways of performing complex work; fewer resources at their disposal; additional public scrutiny for decisions made; and increased reliance for work success on clients and others on the professional team, challenge key theoretical assumptions and raise new questions to explore empirically.

One general assumption worth revisiting post-pandemic is the idea of a profession as a homogenized collective possessing a unified value system, focused mainly on autonomy (Salvatore et al., 2018). A second big-picture assumption the pandemic moves front-and-centre is the separation by professionals of their work and non-work lives. This is related to another waning assumption that sees experts as conforming to a set physical location for client interactions that demarcates office from home, creating separate identities in the process. A post-pandemic world is one in which professional identities grow increasingly fluid and blurred. As Ashforth (2020) notes, organizations must now compete for professionals’ attention as identity objects more than ever before, with that attention dependent on the organizational response to current events. A fourth assumption involves the notion that professionals seek relational excellence with clients and view it as critical to achieving successful work outcomes and personal satisfaction (Hoff, 2017). These assumptions have been central to the research questions we ask about professionals and their work. They have separated out such studies from those of less-skilled workers.

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Studying the Changing Values and Psychological States of Professionals in Greater Depth

The Covid-19 pandemic raises the spectre of a diverse array of values and psychological states scholars should study among individual professionals. These subjective phenomena shift the focus away from traditional macro-level dynamics like legitimacy, prestige, collective power, and professionalization. Instead, they focus on how professionals think about, internalize, and experience their work, uniquely and across different situations and contexts (Barley et al., 2017). The pandemic has forced adaptations that foment values and psychological states including self-preservation, resilience, optimism, courage, compassion, self-esteem, burnout, citizenship, and self-efficacy (Shanafelt et al., 2020). Such values and states have received less attention for professionals. In part this is due to entrenched beliefs that they are de facto in control over how they enact their role, highly intrinsically motivated, consistently satisfied with their work, and resistant to outside pressures on their work. The pandemic calls this understanding into question.

Researchers should ask questions that seek to better understand the processual aspects and personal outcomes of the professional journey in a pandemic changed workplace. They should acknowledge the fluid, fragile nature of the post-pandemic professional psyche. How does a doctor or teacher perceive and navigate risk and failure in their jobs? What are the values and beliefs necessary for them to be satisfied, productive, confident, and happy in the professional role as it is constructed now? How do professionals build up, use, and potentially lose restorative values like compassion, courage, and optimism in various work situations? What situations produce burnout and cynicism or, alternatively, self-efficacy and empowerment in the role? A focus on professional health and well-being gains significance in this regard.

Pursuing such questions requires gathering data from professionals on a range of values, attitudes, and beliefs; not only a select few. It requires idiographic methods like ethnography to understand the unique personal experiences of experts as they navigate complex work situations, getting at dynamics such as compassion fatigue and cynicism that may be more hidden from view with professionals (Hoff, 2017; Kellogg, 2019). It also means using theoretical ideas that touch upon phenomena like uncertainty and uncertainty reduction (Hogg and Belavadi, 2017).

The professional role will be more difficult to perform post-pandemic. Those in that role are increasingly subject to negative outcomes like burnout, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Thus, research should also examine how organizations that employ professionals act (or do not act) to preserve and promote professional well-being. Do employers view professional health and well-being as important? What organizational systems or structures, particularly ones created or advanced due to the pandemic, enable, hinder, or otherwise impact professional health and well-being? In what ways do professionals expect their employers to care for them? How do professional behaviours focused on dynamics like coping influence how organizations think about professional well-being (Muzio et al., 2013)? These types of questions decipher the evolving employer-employee relationship given new employment situations for professionals.
When, Where, and How Professional Work is Done: Research Opportunities

The pandemic will shift, in some cases permanently, when, where, and how professional work is done. The obvious development here is the movement of professionals to working remotely, often from home. Among other things, this shift in work setting will provide them with opportunities to work non-traditional hours if they so wish. It will encourage many of them to think of their work and non-work lives in a more integrated way. It may lessen or strengthen professional commitment to their work and clients. It may focus some of them more on their home lives and roles such as parent at the expense of their professional role. It could reshape the concept of work-family balance.

In all professional work, virtual service delivery is here to stay, at the least providing a complement to traditional forms of face-to-face service delivery. Because of the pandemic, more professionals adapted quickly to technology to interface with clients. In US medicine, for example, it took only a few months to spur telemedicine innovations that doctors had resisted for a decade. In education, professors and teachers went from in-person classroom teaching to remote learning in a couple of weeks. The combination of in-person with remote work will continue. This also means that more professionals will now spend meaningful hours working in semi-solitude from home offices, without direct in-person interaction with co-workers and clients. Professional work could grow more error-prone or lower quality, to the extent it is performed quicker and with less organizational oversight.

Research is required that moves beyond traditional foci such as how professionals adapt to being organizational employees or managers, and identity formation and maintenance (Noordegraaf, 2015). These foci retain importance. But scholars must also now ask questions, for example, directed at the formation and maintenance of new psychological contracts between professional and employer (Baruch and Rousseau, 2018). What expectations will professionals now have of how their employers should treat them post-pandemic? What are key aspects of the new career ‘ecosystem’, as Baruch and Rousseau (2018) put it, that shape the implicit promises made by professional and employer toward each other in more socially and physically distant relationships? Will employers view their obligations towards professional employees differently now, and if so, how does this impact professionals’ role behaviours and attitudes such as loyalty, motivation, and trust?

Other post-pandemic topics ripe for study, and linked to changes in when, where, and how professional work is done include professional productivity in new job structures; the effects of greater work-home life integration on professional learning and career trajectories; the evolution of role socialization and networking processes for professionals; and shifts in the scope and substance of professional work, for example, does such work become more or less difficult to perform. Such questions will require researchers to apply ideas and concepts from social and organizational psychology that have not been used as much to study professionals. For example, work design theories that focus on what Grant and Parker (2009) refer to as relational aspects of work such as social support, and the proactive behaviours of workers resulting from aspects like job complexity, job crafting, and role adjustment.
The Morphing of Professional-Client Relationships: New Concerns and Questions

New concerns and questions also arise for researchers in considering how professional-client relationships may change post-pandemic. Professional-client relationships may become increasingly tenuous. They may grow more distant. This is due to factors like the professional’s need to excel on the transactional rather than relational aspects of service delivery due to things like increased demand for services; physical distance between professional and client; increased reliance on impersonal and virtual modes of interaction; and shifting preferences among professionals and clients in what to expect from each other. These factors existed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic accelerates their growth and significance.

Asking questions about how these factors impact professional-client relationships is important moving forward. For example, which factors effect (and in what ways) key features of effective professional service delivery such as trust, empathy, loyalty, and mutual respect? These relational features are assumed to be a self-propagating part of high quality professional work. How are both the professional and client experience shaped by these new interaction realities? Will professionals and clients define satisfaction with their relationship differently moving forward? How is professional discretion impacted by relationship change, due to less familiarity at times with the client, and thus, less tacit knowledge the professional can use for making decisions? Here again, idiographic methods are important as they capture how each party to the relationship participates in and sees it. Studies that collect primary data through direct observation and interviews can help researchers create updated montages of different aspects of the relationship experience, accounting for the evolving contexts of service delivery.

An additional area of study here is how organizations potentially become a more sustaining source for this relationship, especially to the extent they provide key resources and support for professional service delivery. Transactional forms of service delivery that emphasize speed, efficiency, timely access, and standardization give the organization a significant role in influencing professional and client behaviours, because this is what organizations claim to be good at (Hoff, 2017). This raises important research questions focused on the use of lower-skilled labour and coordinating structures like teams for doing some professional work (Kellogg, 2019); and the role that organizational resources like information technology and artificial intelligence play in facilitating professional communication and decision making. Such questions inevitably ponder the future of professional-client relationships in various industries like health care, education, and finance, as the post-pandemic world creates greater reliance by individual experts on their employers for connecting with clients and making critical parts of their role work effectively.

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