

DEFINING PROFESSIONALISM IN THE TOURISM CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The Tourism Policy Review Group (TPRG) (2003, p. 54) has highlighted the need for the development of the professionalism of the Irish tourism industry, warning that “unless this is done across the industry as a whole, the status and credibility of education and training programmes will be called into question.” Yet, although there is a general academic consensus that professionalism is a prerequisite for success (cf. Smith and Westerbeek, 2004) and is seen as positively related to innovation (Sundbo et al., 2007) (which is perceived as essential to enhancing Irish tourism competitiveness (TPRG, 2003)), a review of the literature indicates that there is both a scarcity of knowledge on what tourism professionalism is and a lack of consistency in its use and meaning. For example, Smith and Westerbeek (2004, p. 39) have noted that the concept “has not commonly been addressed, and when it has, it has usually been concerned with broad assumptions and sociological interpretations.” Professionalism’s multidimensional nature has been argued by Johnson et al. (2006) to involve: (1) altruism, (2) high quality standards, and (3) specialist skills – yet, how relevant and definitive is their conceptualisation in the tourism context? Both Johnson et al. (2006) and Sundbo et al. (2007) have argued that professionalism can be realised through education, hence the need for a precise conceptualisation of what professionalism actually is. Based on the foregoing, and in the tourism context, the purpose of the proposed paper is to identify the key dimensions of professionalism. Dimensionalising this concept is necessary to its evaluation and measurement in order to ensure that educational interventions to enhance professionalism are having a positive impact - a goal which is central to the authors’ ongoing longitudinal study on improving the tourism sector’s professionalism through education. This paper argues that altruism, the existence of a code of ethics, a body of knowledge and specialist skills are key dimensions of tourism professionalism.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Irish tourism industry is fragmented and composed mainly of a heterogeneous mix of micro and small enterprises (Travers et al., 2004) that are particularly susceptible to a myriad of external threats and environmental factors which impede their long-term development and competitiveness (Dale and Robinson, 2007). In addition to facing these broader economic issues, tourism businesses are commonly characterized by resource poverty, poor strategic focus and dependency on the focal owner-manager (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Dale and Robinson, 2007; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009), often resulting in reactive rather than proactive responses to their external environment. The scale of the average business dictates that they have different problems, solutions and environments than their larger counterparts (Leitch and Harrison, 1999). The scale of the average operation also presents particular trading conditions and management practices not seen in larger operations. For instance, the micro and small enterprise owner-manager often has lifestyle objectives which compete with business objectives, such as business growth which may be foregone for the sake of time with the family (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Further, O’Leary and Deegan (2005, p. 428) highlighted the need for management to be multi-skilled and flexible, as they are expected to become involved in general operations in addition to performing more executive functions, thereby reflecting the ‘hands on’ nature of the industry.

In the context of growing recognition of the importance played by these small businesses in terms of local community and regional improvement, there has been a renewed focus at a national level in terms of policy development to support and facilitate their growth and stimulate innovation in these firms (Jones and Tilley, 2003). The literature suggests that professionalism is a determinant of innovation in small tourism firms (Sundbo et al., 2007), however, these small and micro businesses face many obstacles to professionalism, such as inept management skills and low levels of training and education (Dale and Robinson, 2007; Jones and Tilley, 2003). Indeed, both Johnson et al. (2006) and Sundbo et al. (2007) have argued that professionalism can be realised through education. The role of education is all the more important given Hjalager’s (2003, p. 33-34) argument that “closer links between stakeholders and educational institutions is a step towards the professionalisation of the entire

sector and to improving the knowledge base and innovative and economic capabilities". As a consequence, a key aspect of governmental response is the targeted education of the small and micro enterprise owner-manager, with specific reference made to the development of higher levels of professionalism (TPRG, 2003). However, a review of the literature indicates that there is both a scarcity of knowledge on what professionalism is and a lack of consistency in its use and meaning (Arnold, 2002), which represents a significant barrier to enhancing professionalism through education, as an understanding of the constituent elements of a concept is necessary to its learning (Meyer and Land, 2003).

This paper originates in the context of the authors' tertiary institute having been successful in a tendering process to deliver a three year degree-level programme aimed specifically at enhancing the professionalism of micro and small tourism enterprise operators through higher education (BSc in Small Enterprise Management). The authors' ongoing longitudinal study seeks to evaluate whether or not the new degree programme enhances the tourism sector's professionalism. Hence, this paper represents a key stage in the development of an evaluation mechanism into this educational initiative as it presents a conceptualisation of what professionalism actually is, by first detailing the background to professionalism in the extant literature, before outlining the proposed conceptual framework dimensionalising this concept¹. In order to develop understanding of the terminology, a review of the historical origins of the concept is first necessary.

A brief history of professionalism

The literature on professionalism originates predominantly from the sociology field, with seminal work from Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) guiding later studies in this subject area. In early professionalism research, the emphasis was placed on the stability and civility of social systems created by professional values of collegiality, occupational identity and the application of standards of behaviour (Brock et al., 1999; Noordegraaf, 2007). In the 1950's and 60's, the research described professionalism as an institution, with reference made to the collective regulation within the professional group and traits shared by members of a profession (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). A key outcome of this era was recognition of

¹ This framework is a work-in-progress. It is perceived that further dimensions may be identified through discussions with tourism stakeholders (Fáilte Ireland, key academics and leading practitioners) which will be completed this Summer.

education's role in the development of a profession, for example, Greenwood (1957) and Wilensky (1964) argued that a lengthy training period was required in order to acquire the body of knowledge and expertise associated with professions.

In the 1970's, the research interest centred on the professionalisation process, with different occupational groups measured in terms of their progress towards becoming full professions dependent on their possession of particular competencies or traits (Swales, 2003). In particular, Larson (1977) examined how professions established their special market position and the process by which they achieved social closure of that market, whereas Johnson (1972) identified how the professions maintained and developed their power-base. A trait emphasis emerged with Etzioni (1969) penning the term 'semi-professional' if the occupation had adopted only some of the traits associated with professionalism but did not have, for example, the requisite knowledge base or service ethic. There was general acceptance that the professionalisation of an occupational field determined the career possibilities of that field (Formadi, 2008), and that "expertise began to emerge as the dominant feature of professionalism" (Bloland and Tempel, 2004, p. 8).

More recently, the research focus has moved towards professionalism as a normative value, with recognition of professionalism as an ideology and general consensus that it is multi-dimensional, however, dissension exists as to what the dimensions are (Eraut, 1994; Prasad and Prasad, 1994). For instance, in their review of the medical literature surrounding professionalism, Van de Camp et al. (2004) revealed ninety constituent elements of professionalism, including altruism and submission to a code of ethics. However, it is perceived by this paper's authors that many of these elements: (1) overlap, (2) are not relevant to the tourism sector, and (3) are either antecedents or outcomes of professionalism. The framework is also informed by Evett et al. (2009, p. 142) who explained that the difference between occupations and professions was that professionals were: "autonomous and performed a public service; they were guided in their decision-making by a professional ethic or code of conduct; they were in special relations of trust with clients as well as with employers/managers; and they were altruistic and motivated by universalistic values". This definition of professionalism captures two dimensions of professionalism, namely, altruism and a code of ethics, but this fails to take into account the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of professionalism proposed by Van de Camp et al. (2004). It also fails to incorporate the qualifying attributes of: a body of knowledge as well as specialist skills and expertise

(Caro, 1992), which have been identified as key aspects of professionalism in the tourism context (Sheldon, 1989).

The literature on professionalism in tourism is scarce, and has been open to different interpretations, for example, Hjalager and Anderson (2001) refer to the development of a professional culture in the Danish tourist industry through the employment of “personnel trained specifically for the sector”. Further, a review of the literature highlights ambiguity in the use of the term “increased professionalism”, with some authors using the term to refer to the introduction of a professional manager in family-run firms (Zhang & Ma, 2009).

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study examines professionalism at the level of the individual, and specifically examines those normative values and traits which the literature indicates are essential to an individual’s development, as championed by Caro (1992), rather than the process or outcomes of professionalisation. The next section of the paper presents each of the dimensions of professionalism with a view to justifying their inclusion in the conceptual model (as presented in Figure 1 below), starting with the importance of altruism.



Figure 1: Conceptualisation of the dimensions of professionalism in the tourism context

Altruism

Reflecting the medical origin of much of the literature surrounding professionalism, altruism is often cited as a characteristic of the professions; it is described by Monroe (1998, p. 5) as entailing action or “behaviour intended to benefit another, even when this risks possible sacrifice to the welfare of the actor”. The idea of the practitioner led by a belief in self-sacrifice or a service orientation is referred to in many descriptions of professionalism (Wilensky, 1964; Kuhlmann and Bourgeault, 2008). It is also often closely associated with the need for high levels of trust, honesty and integrity inherent in the relationship between the professional and their client, due to the nature of professional practice; as expressed by Becker (1970, p. 95) “If the client is to trust the professional completely he [*sic*] must feel that there are no other interests which will be put before his in the performance of the professional activity”. Ginsburg et al. (2004) highlighted the difficulties in developing this highest of ideals, and also in assessing its pro-social application. Furthermore, Cohen (2006, p. 609) suggested “Living up to professionalism’s core expectation to subordinate self-interest in deference to the interest of others has always required the surmounting of formidable challenges, not least of which is overcoming human nature itself.” Consequently, strong socializing influences are required to influence the behavior of the professionals, and academia has a vital role to play in this process of promoting and sustaining professionalism (Cohen, 2006). Having established altruism as a dimension of professionalism, in line with the objectives of this paper, the next section details the code of ethics common to professionals.

Code of Ethics

Fox (2000, p. 70) refers to ethics as a value system, and stated that it is “the generalised principles that guide a person’s evaluation of decisions or specific instances of conduct”. It is appropriate at this point to distinguish between codes of conduct and codes of ethics, as according to Noordegraaf (2007, p. 767) “Codes of conduct prescribe rules of the game; codes of ethics prescribe appropriate behavior”. In light of the foregoing, this study focuses on the value system governing the tourism operator’s decision-making and behaviour, drawing on Hultsman’s (1995) paper ‘Just Tourism’ which proposed an ethical framework for the industry. In this regard, “a tourism service ethic can be viewed as a foundational and

articulated notion of what tourism professionals collectively accept and tacitly understand as being principled behavior” (Hultsman, 1995, p. 556). The need for a code of ethics in tourism has been emphasized by, amongst others, Payne and Dimanche (1996), who argued the need for ethical treatment of employees as well as customers, in addition to the need to recognize the environmental impact of tourism operations, and accommodate the inter-relatedness of tourism businesses within a community. More recently, Fox (2000) focused on the need for managerial ethical standards in the Croatian hotel industry, highlighting the criticality of these standards for the long-term development of this segment of the industry.

However, Boland and Tempel (2004) highlighted some of the particular difficulties in measuring certain aspects of the traits associated with professionalism, for example, the existence of a professional association, or a code of ethics, where a profession either has one or not, but it doesn't allow for strength of the association, or level of compliance with the code of conduct. Boland and Tempel (2004, p. 10) argued “codes of ethics can be badly or well written. They may be too general or too specific, too stringent or too lax.” Indeed, in the context of the hospitality industry, Coughlan (2001, p. 157) called for further research into the relevance and effectiveness of existing professional codes and the need for change “where guidelines are vague or enforcement is lacking”. It is not within the remit of this paper to embellish further on the role of professional bodies or this enforcement aspect, as the purpose of this paper is to outline the dimensions of professionalism, hence, the next section details the existence of a body of knowledge relevant to this discussion.

Body of Knowledge

One of the traits of professionalism most frequently mentioned in the literature is that “professional practice is founded on a base of theoretical esoteric knowledge” (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 42), that is, knowledge only available to a select few, who are enlightened, initiated or specially educated. Nonaka (1994) argued that knowledge is a multi-faceted construct with multiple meanings, including for instance, the result of the interpretation or processing of information through the mind of the individual (Huber, 1991; Alavi and Leidner, 1999). Knowledge is also referred to as “...a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p. 5). Others have argued

that knowledge is the subjective storage of aggregate information (Strydom, 1994) or expertise (Machlup, 1984), and is considered relative, transformable and historically transient (Lawson, 1997). At its most basic level, knowledge is created by individuals (Nonaka, 1994) and “knowledge facilitates the use of other knowledge” (Powell et al., 1996, p. 120). Szulanski (1996) concurred with this viewpoint and added that the participant’s ability to both value and apply the new knowledge is the key to ‘best practice’.

Wilensky (1964) developed the argument for the professions possessing a codified body of knowledge, which Freidson (1970) identified as made up of two elements: (i) pure knowledge and theory, and (ii) their application in practice. Similarly, Schön (1983, p. 21) argued that “professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique”. Accordingly, Noordegraaf (2007, p.765) argued that “professionalism, then is perceived to be about applying general, scientific knowledge to specific cases in rigorous and therefore routinized or institutionalized ways (see Abbott, 1988; Elliott, 1972 Freidson, 1994, 2001).

In the traditional professions such as law and medicine, the concept of having specialist knowledge and expertise, has been emphasized as a justification for the higher status, income and prestige they receive; it also acted as a barrier to entry into the particular profession. Fournier (1999, 2000) suggested that the professional learned how to behave competently dealing with situations of complexity and uncertainty, with their knowledge base² becoming over time more and more tacit³ (Sternberg and Horvath, 1999). Moreover, the literature indicates that the exclusivity of this body of knowledge and expertise was usually associated with a lengthy training or education process to become a member of the profession.

In terms of the body of knowledge in tourism, tourism as a field of enquiry has developed over the past two decades (Pritchard and Morgan, 2007; Xiao and Smith, 2006); however, “at the moment it lacks the level of theoretical underpinning that would allow it to become a discipline” (Cooper et al., 2008, p. 5). Similarly, Hjalager (2003, p. 34) referred to tourism students requiring a “very industry-specific knowledge”, and highlighted the need for higher

² A knowledge base, as described by Cheetham and Chivers (2001, p. 265), citing Eraut and Cole (1993, p. 13) incorporates all or some of the following: “key concepts and theories necessary for understanding professional practice; acts and data required for the day to day practice of the profession; and procedures used in day to day practice”.

³ Tacit knowledge describes how “we can know more than we can tell”, referring to that knowledge which is often personal, intuitive and difficult to formulate (Polanyi, 1966, p.4).

education in tourism. In an Irish context, Fáilte Ireland's HRD Strategy (Fáilte Ireland, 2005, p. 41) document identified 299 educational courses available in hospitality, tourism and leisure, but also highlighted the bias in provision of programmes at certificate level (72% of awards) "...suggesting that tourism programmes are particularly strongly represented in further (as distinct from higher) education". Tourism education at third level has traditionally been focused on vocational training in craft skills (Inui et al., 2006); however, recent moves have been made to address the professional development of tourism operators in this arena (see for example, Holden et al., 2010).

As a key element of the dimensions of professionalism, Bloland and Tempel (2004, p. 11) contend that, while the characteristic of expertise is relatively straight forward to measure as "a body of knowledge understood and demonstrated by the number of professional courses taken, years of apprenticeship, certification, licensure and degrees", professional expertise "...has some odd qualities that make several aspects of expertise difficult to measure. If the expert knowledge appears to be too concrete, either the whole or parts of the knowledge base can be taken over and used by other occupations". In light of this contention, the choice of measurement scales to accommodate these difficulties will be all the more important in the longitudinal study which the authors are currently undertaking.

Further to this discussion is the relationship between knowledge and skills, as declarative knowledge is seen as a prerequisite to skill development (Anderson, 1982). Further, Deakins and Freel (1998) argued that SME owner-managers valued highly the transference of skills, particularly as Sullivan (2000) determined that initiatives which did not provide the practical skills to apply new knowledge were of little value to firms. Indeed, the practical application of new skills and knowledge is an essential element of any learning initiative (Paauwe and Williams, 2001). Although knowledge and skills are inter-related, this study follows Kraiger et al. (1993) in distinguishing between these two dimensions as developed further in the following section.

Specialist Skills and Expertise

In defining a skill, Knapp (1963, p. 4) argued that it is "the learned ability to bring about pre-determined results with maximum certainty, often with the minimum outlay of time, energy or both" while Hinchliffe (2002) added that skills are the foundations of the ability to

complete job-tasks. In the context of this paper, the emphasis is placed on the fact that skill acquisition leads to predictable levels of task performance and accuracy (Green, 1998) and later, in the case of professionals, the development of expertise. Additionally, Gagné et al. (1992, p. 47) argued that “the acquisition of a motor skill can be reasonably inferred when the student can perform the act in a variety of contexts”. In terms of skill development, Kraiger et al. (1993) (following Anderson, 1982; Fitts, 1964; Fitts and Posner, 1967) defined three stages in skill development: (1) initial skill acquisition, (2) skill compilation, and (3) skill automaticity. The first stage involves the transition from knowledge that is declarative to knowledge that is procedural and can involve formal instruction (Neves and Anderson, 1981; Chapman and Lovell, 2006). Whereas, skill mastery is the result of continual practice, the characteristics of performance at this point are fluid, accomplished and individualised (Kraiger et al., 1993) with the learner no longer conscious of all the processes being initiated. Professionalism has, since the times of apprenticeship in the nineteenth century, been associated with specialised skills and, as mentioned previously, tourism education has traditionally been dominated by an emphasis on skill development.

In reviewing the literature, some authors differentiated between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills, referring to those skills that involve an element of physical exertion or technical aspects of performing a job as ‘hard’ (Page et al., 1993). Whereas, ‘soft skills’ are seen as “interpersonal, human, people, or behavioral skills, and place emphasis on personal behavior and managing relationships between people” (Rainsbury et al., 2002, p. 9). The literature highlights that hard skills are easier to learn (Caudron, 1999) and easier to measure than soft skills, however, there is a growing recognition that both skill types are complementary and necessary for individual successful performance in the workplace (Rainsbury et al., 2002; Hodges and Burchell, 2003). Consequently, both skill types are seen as necessary outcomes in the development of new professionals through higher education and in particular preparing them for the workplace (Nilsson, 2007). Indeed, Zagonari’s (2009, p. 7) analysis of education and training in tourism highlighted that not only are high quality standards associated with skill specialisation but also: “policies on tourism education and training should provide a balance between professional skills, basic knowledge, thematic specialisation: students should reach professional skills in order to meet the current qualitative need of firms”. However, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, what these professional skills are in the tourism context has not been specifically addressed to date, and represents an area of further interest in the current ongoing study. Nevertheless, the literature

has indicated the need for professional skills in the sector, for example, Ap and Wong (2001) determined that if tour guides wished to raise the recognition, status and career opportunities open to them, they needed to develop their professional skills. Indeed, Baum and Szivas (2008) highlighted the problems encountered in the Thai tourism sector, where a lack of tourism expertise in the local population has been of detriment to the development of the industry. Moreover, Hjalager (2003, p. 34) focussed attention on the business practices in Euro-Disney, where language skills and personality traits are more highly valued than specific tourism related qualifications. This reflects a particular challenge for tertiary education, as it struggles to meet the needs of a variety of different stakeholders, and deliver specialised skills and very industry-specific knowledge in a very dynamic environment (Hjalager, 2003). Indeed, there is growing recognition of the need to constantly upgrade professional skills throughout an individual's working life, with the concept of lifelong learning gaining ground in this sector (Christou, 1999, p. 684). Further, the professionalism literature frequently singles out such skills as interpersonal skills, communication skills and leadership skills in descriptions of professionals (Van de Camp et al., p. 698); for the purposes of this paper these skills have been grouped under the one heading – specialist skills and expertise.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to address the need for a precise conceptualisation of what tourism professionalism is to guide the authors' ongoing longitudinal study. The framework highlights the multiple dimensions which contribute to the development of the values and traits of a professional: altruism, code of ethics, body of knowledge as well as specialist skills and expertise. Similar to Sheldon's (1989) study on tourism professionalism, this paper indicates the importance of formal educational programmes to further enhance professionalism. This paper also identifies the need for clarity on the role of professional bodies and associations, which represents an area for future study.

In addition to adding to our understanding of this concept, this paper also represents the first step towards the evaluation and measurement of the impact of an educational initiative which specifically targets the enhancement of professionalism as an outcome. The next step will be to identify a method and means of measuring these dimensions in order to evaluate whether or not the new degree programme has enhanced the tourism sector's professionalism.

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