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Being Professional at Home or Home-making as a Profession

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The idea of linking professionalism and homemaking is an interesting issue to explore. In the brief given to us by Home Renaissance Foundation we were asked to contribute and link our research on professionals with the aims of this conference. Our contribution draws from the areas of professional service firms and professionalism in management. From this perspective, most people would probably say that they would like to be professionals at home as they are in other spheres of their professional life. However, the question is, do we all have the same understanding of what it means to be professional at home? Furthermore, questions on the topic need to be asked: Is home-making a profession? Would we like to run a home with the same dedication and standards we have in any other profession? Is the home-maker a professional? Answering these questions leads to a series of other linked questions: What is a professional? And what is a profession?

The answer to these questions requires close examination and we are not here to give any final recipes or solutions. Given the impact that this issue has on our daily life and society at large, we must dig deeper when considering these questions. This paper will simply lay out some concepts and ideas to spark deeper discussion on this topic. What does it mean to be a professional at home or to make home-making a profession? In brief, this presentation will first define what a profession is, secondly, what it means to be a professional, and lastly, consider whether this applies to 'home-makers as a profession' or 'being professional as a homemaker'.

The profession

It is commonly accepted among researchers that a profession is an occupation that is characterised by three traits.² First of all, a profession has a common basis of theoretical knowledge and practical skills that may or may not be certified by a degree or some sort of official recognition. Essentially, it has a common body of knowledge³. Secondly, a profession has an ethical commitment that goes beyond what we would call a code of ethics. Professionals – doctors and lawyers come to mind specifically, but it is true for professions in general – are expected to put their client's interests before their own⁴. Therefore, if we trust a professional it is because we believe he or she is going to put our interests before his or hers. That is the ethical commitment. Thirdly, a profession has some kind of overarching organisation⁵ to structure professionals' interests. A profession is a community of practitioners⁶ that have sanctions, norms for entry and social recognition⁷ of the work they do. Those three elements help us to define a profession.

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² For a more complete information, see Meadows (1946, pp.145-164). Here the author reviewed a series of definitions which had in common those three traits. Examples of more recent discussions are Khurana, *et al.* (2002) and Khurana *et al.* (2005).

³ See, for example, Greenwood *et al.* (2002), and Nanda (2004).

⁴ See Nanda (2002), Maister (1997), Khurana *et al.* (2002), or Empson (2007).

⁵ See the perspectives of Parsons (1939) and Abbot (1992), whose entire work has this focused on the social and institutional facet of professions.

⁶ About the concept of communities of practice, see Brown *et al.* (1991; 2001)

The professional

Once we have defined the traits of a profession, we may wonder how a person becomes a professional. The professional possesses the appropriate knowledge for this profession, consistently practices the ethical commitment, and behaves as a professional according to the rules and norms of the profession. But how can we describe this behaviour? Which are the aspects that it entails? We could explore behaviour from the point of view of a series of qualities that the person embodies. These qualities are habits, so they can be developed and improved through practice; as they are observable through behavior, they can be assessed. Qualities with these characteristics are known as *competences*. Although there are many different models of competences, we are following the model that Pablo Cardona has developed in collaboration with other scholars⁸. These authors propose a classification of leadership competences for managers — also useful to be applied to professionals — into three groups: business competences, interpersonal competences and personal competences. The advantage of this model is that it includes all spheres of a professional's behavior: the practical expertise and theoretical knowledge specific of the profession, the needed abilities for interpersonal relationships and, finally, the competences which are indispensable for self-leadership.

First there is a *technical competence*. I would say that a person is not a professional if he or she does not know everything about his or her profession. Which means that technical knowledge, or technical competence if you prefer, has to be developed. Second, the person must have *interpersonal competences*. We would never think about a good doctor who is not able to relate to the patient in this interpersonal way. We know, for instance, the difference between a researcher, someone who is very good at researching medical issues, and a doctor, who can go and speak to the patient, help the patient and so on. Lastly, if we go deeper, there is a third level of competences that every professional should develop to have this rounded way of thinking about the professional, namely, *personal competences*. The personal level goes into resources such as creativity, things pertaining to determination, emotional balance, self-knowledge, and integrity.

In developing professionals, there is, in our opinion, too much emphasis on the first layer, that is, knowledge, technology, and skills, but not enough emphasis is placed on the other two levels (see Prats *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, in practice, there are many who neglect the personal level. It is crucial to realise, though, that personal competences are the basis for developing the other two levels of competences. For instance, perseverance, a competence in the personal sphere, is needed to become a good medical doctor. A doctor who has not been working hard to study the scientific foundations of its practice will not be a good professional. This profession requires years of study, learning and training before one is qualified to practice medicine. The three levels of competences are important for any professional. In fact, we would claim that the right 'professional spirit' includes a concern for training and developing knowledge and skills at the three previously described levels. Many of the training programmes imparted nowadays, though, make very lopsided professionals

⁷ Empson's (2007) definition of profession highlights this trait. Nanda (2004) considers the term "profession" as a label attached to society to an individual or group. In general, most of literature of sociological perspective underlines those characteristics.

⁸ Specifically, we are following the concepts and classification as established in Cardona *et al.* (2005) and Cardona *et al.* (2009).

who are very good on the technical level, but not so good on the other two⁹. However, all of us have the experience that in any profession you might have in mind, when you find attractive examples of lawyers, journalists, doctors, and so on, all of them are people who have developed these three aspects throughout their career and become rounded professionals¹⁰. A professional is someone who is able to perform a particular job with a level of expertise and competences that make his or her contributions uniquely valuable for the client.

Is home-making a profession and consequently the home-maker a professional?

At this point we must ask ourselves whether or not the definition of professional can be applied to homemakers. To begin to answer this question we must also consider if it applies to homemakers in a way that we can engage in homemaking with a professional spirit. Furthermore, is homemaking a profession? Let's examine the different aspects going step by step. First, we need to know whether we have enough knowledge, scientifically-based knowledge, which has been developed to the point that we can claim that homemaking has a differentiated body of knowledge that although based on other established sciences, it has its own idiosyncrasy. In our opinion, this is something in its preliminaries but we are not there yet. There is, indeed, knowledge being developed that is close to the area of home-making and could be the basis for the development of a specific and identifiable body of knowledge. For instance, many of the studies related to hospitality, care-giving, interior decoration or organization management could be tailored and transform to fit the needs of a home.

Second, we mentioned that having ethical commitments is one of the characteristics of a profession. The issue here becomes complicated to assess, given that homemaking is usually done within a family, and not as a "service to clients". However, we could easily stretch the concept and agree that it is difficult to refute that there is room for an ethical commitment — putting client's interest before the professional's interest — in doing this job.

Finally, we must identify an overarching organization that would structure and protect the interest of homemakers as a body of professionals; an institution that could certify knowledge and develop professional practices as a reference for professionals' behaviour. We must admit that we are far from having such structures in place, with the exception of some associations without prescriptive or representation power.

In summary, home making lacks some of the basic traits of a profession as being defined previously. However, it is acknowledged that there are professions which lack some of the traits above described. For example, consultancy or investment banking do not have established barriers to entry into their practice or a reputation for ethical aims but are considered to possess a considerable level of expertise (knowledge) for which are well paid. On the other hand, nurses in general do not hold the high social status and level of remuneration of other professions but they have the other characteristics (Empson, 2007). Knowing also that the content and structure of

⁹ It is not surprising that much research on professional expertise and management of professionals only considers the technical knowledge aspect of the professional. Examples of a somehow partial characterization of professionals are Chang *et al.* (2004), Teece (2003) or Hitt *et al.* (2001).

¹⁰ Kurana *et al.* (2002), and Snook *et al.* (2004) provide an insightful application of these ideas to management.

professions develop over time the question that we pose for further discussion is whether it would be beneficial for individuals and society to push the development of homemaking as a profession.

We must also answer a more fundamental question regarding home-making as a profession. We need to consider whether a person can develop as a professional as a homemaker. In other words, if this profession has the potential for being as fulfilling as any other profession is. Indeed, some people would claim that working at home, in some way hinders one's ability to develop as a professional. We propose that, if homemakers develop the three levels of competences discussed above, they might really develop as a person: they become better professionals as well as more complete human beings.

We would argue that maybe the problem lays in our lack of understanding of what it means to be a professional. If we think about the three levels we were just discussing and we ask ourselves whether there is a technical knowledge that can be learned and whether there is room for interpersonal and personal development by working as a home-maker, there is not much doubt that the answer will be affirmative. We have heard from the previous speaker that home is possibly the basis where we develop and we help others to develop. Do we think that things such as creativity, determination, intellectual development and emotional balance can be developed to the fullest as a homemaker? The answer is potentially yes and much more holistically that in other professions. Hence we might question if we are, perhaps, being fooled by other job propositions that sometimes place a lot of emphasis on scientific base, or even on the *glamour* that society attributes to them rather than taking into account what it really means to develop a full and professional career. A fair position would be to accept that also homemaking, as any other profession, has the potential for fulfilling a personal aspiration to improve to the fullest.

I will conclude with something to reflect upon: do we understand work in its nature, as a path of perfection while serving others? Are we imposing the superficiality that we sometimes use in judging other professional paths on our view of homemaking? Is that why we do not find a way to make homemaking a respected job? With a deep understanding of work, and of what it means to be a professional, maybe we can also find ways to make homemaking professionally interesting and also, at the end of the day, a real profession.

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