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2020

# Transnational Professionals

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Annu. Rev. Sociol. 2020. 46:399–417

First published as a Review in Advance on  
February 10, 2020

The *Annual Review of Sociology* is online at  
[soc.annualreviews.org](http://soc.annualreviews.org)

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-112019-053842>

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### Keywords

professions, professionals, transnational, cross-border, globalization, professionalization

### Abstract

This review answers recent calls to consider the transformative role of transnational professionals in contemporary globalization. It departs from the dominant perspective, which views professions as constrained by states' geographical boundaries and by organizations such as nationally based professional associations. Transnational professionals have particular characteristics: they combine high-level abstract knowledge, high mobility across national and organizational settings, social and cultural capital, and distributed agency to shape global practices. Over the past two decades, a vibrant research stream has emerged on these professionals and their boundary-crossing work, raising new questions about agency, territoriality, and power. We examine transnational professionals across a range of occupations and sectors, as well as world regions, extracting the implications for sociological theory and methods. We outline a scholarly agenda highlighting the opportunity structures and likely trajectories for those who locate themselves in transnational professional spaces, suggesting how they can be investigated in future research.

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## INTRODUCTION

The sociology of the professions has for decades taken the nation-state as its point of departure: The scholarly agenda derives from the premise that professions are constituted at the national level, dependent on powers and privileges granted by the state (Ramirez 2010). The dominant analytic paradigm—as established in the work of Larson (1977), Freidson (1984), Abbott (1988), and Bourdieu (1996; see also Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992)—has emerged from this state-centric perspective. But it was not always so: The earliest research in this area focused on the “free professions” (Hughes 1958, p. 132) and their autonomy from both states and employer organizations (e.g., Carr-Saunders & Wilson 1933, Mauss & Durkheim 1937, Parsons 1939). This foundational scholarship appeared nearly a century ago, when “the emergence of professional occupations preceded the development of a strong central state” (Scott 2008, p. 220); indeed, the key insight of this work was that professions wielded independent social power on par with, and often in competition with, that of states and market-based organizations (Hughes 1963, Evetts 2003). This perspective was sidelined for a time by a research paradigm that emphasized professionals’ dependence on larger institutions. However, the growing stream of work on a “cadre of truly global practitioners” (Faulconbridge & Muzio 2011, p. 143), whose power is contingent on “the extent that they become extraterritorial” (Beck 2008, p. 796), has fueled repeated calls (e.g., Sheller & Urry 2006, Go & Krause 2016, Blok et al. 2018) to expand the field’s analytic models and research agenda. This article addresses those calls by outlining a rescaled sociology of the professions, inclusive of the contemporary free professionals operating at the global level of analysis (Meyer 2010).

With increasing recognition of the changing nature of work has come scholarly awareness that the nation-state and nation-bound enterprises no longer form the essential context for professional activity (Barley & Kunda 2004, Beck & Sznaider 2006). As industrial production has given way to knowledge work (Gouldner 1979), sociologists have documented case after case of new international professionals (Sassen 2001; see also Castells 1996, Favell 2008, Fechter 2007) whose primary offering consists of ideas that cross national and organizational frontiers. Empirical cases include elite subgroups of traditional professionals, such as accountants (Spence et al. 2016), physicians (Kerr et al. 2016), and lawyers (Smets et al. 2012), along with newer varieties of experts, such as wealth managers (Harrington 2016, 2017a), software engineers (Barley & Kunda 2004), and those from diverse professional backgrounds concentrating on particular issues (Henriksen & Seabrooke 2016). This research does not imply the obsolescence of states, but rather that “what we have today is in effect a dual system, the official one of the ‘national economies’ of states, and the real but largely unofficial one of transnational units and institutions” (Hobsbawm 1998, p. 4). Professionals have not only benefitted from this system, but have been instrumental in building it: driving the technological, legal, and political changes that facilitate the international mobility of elites, capital, and ideas. While this project has been supported by states and market-based organizations—for example, by governments shifting regulatory functions onto professional bodies, or by the growth of multinational enterprises—there is increasing recognition among scholars that some professionals have transcended both public- and private-sector bureaucracies. Like the free professions who were the subject of early twentieth-century research, the practitioners featured in this more recent stream of work are often “itinerant professionals who operate outside any single organizational context” (Evans et al. 2004, p. 1). These findings suggest that the privileged analytic position of states and market-based organizations should be questioned.

This article takes up the challenges posed by recent research to examine professionals’ creation, diffusion, and application of knowledge on a global scale. It takes seriously claims of these professionals’ supremacy as “the most influential contemporary crafters of institutions” (Scott 2008, p. 223), competing with the power of states and firms. Although they have been the subjects of

a vibrant research stream for the past 20 years, these transnational practitioners and their work have remained largely outside the dominant paradigm in the sociology of the professions. We seek to expand scholarly analysis and its capacity to offer new insights on professionals by releasing it from the constraints of an interpretive framework with state and market bureaucracies at its center. In this effort, the article first reviews the state of the art in research on transnational professionals, then identifies open issues of debate, such as agency, territoriality, and inequality. The article then points to the theoretical and methodological implications of bringing transnational professionals into the sociology of the professions, and it concludes by highlighting key questions for future research to consider. Ultimately, the review suggests possibilities for renewal in the field by integrating contemporary work on globalization with neglected insights from classic studies of professional work.

## THE PHENOMENON OF TRANSNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

Professionals generally can be defined as people bound by their commitment to a body of abstract knowledge and its associated practices. Professions are composed of individuals who share this commitment, who “consider themselves to be engaged in the same type of work” and “whose identities are drawn from the work” (Van Maanen & Barley 1984, p. 287). Transnational professionals do not differ from nation-based professionals in these essential features; what distinguishes the former from the latter is the willingness and ability to work across or between the boundaries of state and market bureaucracies. This requires particular types of social and cultural capital (for example, specific language skills and habitus), along with mastery of knowledge applicable to problems that are either global (such as disease or earthquakes) or highly salient to powerful cross-border actors [such as multinational enterprises and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)]. As a practical matter, professionals can only become transnational if they have the legal right and material resources to exit their national and organizational settings at will. Some of these factors may be beyond the control of individuals, meaning that transnationality in the professions stems from a combination of agency and opportunity structures—a point that is examined in greater detail toward the end of the article.

Transnational professionals enjoy a distinctive position in relation to states and organizations. For example, while transnational professionals may be licensed at the state or local level, their ability to practice is not wholly constrained—as the nation-based professions are—by the geographical boundaries or authority of the licensing body. Similarly, transnational professionals use their positions as members of professional associations, or as employees of firms and international NGOs, as means of increasing their autonomy: Rather than being subordinated to those organizations, practitioners use them as platforms to develop, diffuse, and consolidate their knowledge mandates at a transnational level (Halliday 1987, Block-Lieb & Halliday 2017). For example, they may use professional associations to develop global codes of conduct and best practices, as well as shared understandings of jurisdiction that build solidarity among practitioners across national and organizational contexts (Hydle & Hopwood 2019). By the same token, these professionals can build transnational communities that include common platforms to diagnose and address the issues on which they claim expert authority (Faulconbridge et al. 2012, Seabrooke & Henriksen 2017).

In other words, states and private-sector organizations still matter in a sociological analysis of transnational professionals, but they act less as constraints than as facilitators of greater power and autonomy for those practitioners. For example, some states and cross-national governance bodies have delegated to professionals the tasks of defining and solving key social, economic and political problems (Tsingou 2015, Kennedy 2018). This, along with the expansion of multinational

enterprises and professional service firms, has empowered some professionals by globalizing the diffusion and impact of their conceptual frameworks, standards, and best practices (Brunsson & Jacobsson 2000, Faulconbridge & Grubbauer 2015, Boussebaa & Faulconbridge 2018). This is not to say that transnational professionals are purely the products of growth in the size and scale of professional service firms and other multinational enterprises; rather, we argue that they, along with states, can unintentionally serve as platforms for professionals to exercise authority beyond national and organizational boundaries.

Thus, while only 3.2% of the world's people live outside the country of their birth—and many of them are young, poor, and ill-educated (Young 2018)—transnational professionals, as a minority of a minority, wield outsize influence that deserves more scholarly attention. They are shaping international debates and policy agendas (Tsingou 2015) and establishing global health care chains (Yeates 2012); they are often more productive and influential than natives of the countries where they are employed (Hunter et al. 2009). The services these professionals provide have ripple effects across time, as well as space: For example, several studies have analyzed the enduring impact of a cadre of economists trained at the University of Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s, who later went on to transform the political economies of Chile, Brazil, and Mexico (Babb 2001, Dezalay & Garth 2002, Valdes 2008, Van Gunten 2015). Hence our motivation to review the research on transnational professionals and to establish a research agenda that takes better account of them.

Empirical evidence suggests that transnationality need not be a permanent condition for professionals to wield cross-border influence, contrary to claims that only practitioners who spend their entire working lives outside their native countries should be considered transnational (e.g., Spence et al. 2018). Instead, recent work affirms the increasing fluidity of professionals' movements among states and organizations, as part of a larger process that Bauman (2000, p. 170) has described as “the accelerating ‘liquefaction’ of modern life.” At the same time, while these areas of professional activity include many skilled migrants, mobility alone does not make a transnational professional; individuals must also possess specific forms of social and cultural capital (including language skills and habitus) and master an abstract body of knowledge applicable to phenomena that transcend national boundaries, from gravitational waves (Collins 2017), to infectious disease (Harris 2017), to tax compliance (Guerra & Harrington 2018). The following sections highlight four dominant clusters of research on transnational practice; these are representative of the emerging scholarly field but not exhaustive of the professional domains it explores.

### **Law, Finance, Economics, and Accounting**

These domains of transnational practice involve advising clients with assets spread across multiple jurisdictions, necessitating complex arrangements for taxation, investment, and commercial ventures. Clientele may include governments, enterprises, educational or research institutions, and ultrawealthy individuals. The lawyers, accountants, and financial advisers they employ must coordinate strategies across jurisdictions and be able to work effectively within different legal and economic systems, with their conflicts and ambiguities (Quack 2007, Faulconbridge & Muzio 2014, Spence et al. 2015, Liu et al. 2016). These activities may promote the transnationality of professionals engaged in adjacent activities. For example, as Halliday & Carruthers (2007) have shown, finance is tightly enmeshed with transnational law, affecting how finance professionals locate themselves in policy networks (Seabrooke & Tsingou 2014).

Educational institutions have played a pivotal role in promoting transnationality in these professions. Universities—particularly the elite Anglophone institutions—are magnets for talented individuals from around the world seeking professional careers. About 20% of US faculty positions in law, finance, and accounting are held by foreign-born scholars (National Science Board

2018). The trend is even more pronounced in economics, where most practitioners are employed outside their home countries (Fourcade 2006); for example, 75% of assistant professors in the top ten economics departments among US universities earned their first degree outside of the United States (Hunter et al. 2009, p. F246). Furthermore, a degree from a top university facilitates transnational mobility for graduates. Among economic policy professionals working in organizations, a disproportionate number are drawn from elite institutions in the United States and United Kingdom, regardless of their national origins; this may reflect the expectation that alumni of these universities share in a common epistemic orientation and also possess elite social and cultural capital that legitimizes their work (Ban et al. 2016, Helgadóttir 2016, Kentikelenis & Seabrooke 2017).

### **Physical and Natural Sciences**

Professionals in the physical and natural sciences have engaged in international collaborations for centuries; this has accelerated with more complex and resource-intensive research programs, which demand international cooperation—or the deep pockets of multinational enterprises—to raise funds. Thus, costly undertakings, like the experiments in subatomic physics conducted at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, are funded by the contributions of 22 member states and staffed by scientific personnel from more than 25 countries (CERN 2017, table 21, p. 18). In keeping with this model, studies of transnationality among physicists estimate that between 44% (Hunter et al. 2009) and 50% (Ioannidis 2004) work outside the countries of their birth. Among biologists, an estimated 32% work outside their native countries (Ioannidis 2004). Within the United States, 46% of doctorate-holders employed in the physical sciences are foreign born, as are a virtually identical percentage of doctorate-holders in the biological sciences, including environmental and agricultural specialties (National Science Board 2018). Work done by these scientists is notable for both its transnational character and “relentless professionalism” in sifting through what can be presented to international peers as scientific discovery (Collins 2017).

### **Mathematics, Computer Science, and Engineering**

Perhaps due to the universality of the calculative processes underlying their work, a significant proportion of mathematicians, computer scientists, and engineers become transnational professionals. Globally, for example, an estimated 32% of computer scientists live and work outside the countries of their birth (Ioannidis 2004). Many settle in the United States, where approximately 57% of employed individuals with doctorates in computer science and math are foreign born; the figures are similar (54%) for those with doctorates in engineering (National Science Board 2018). While the majority of these highly skilled individuals originate from China and India, recent research underscores that they do not constitute a brain drain from their native countries; rather, they represent human nodes in a web of knowledge circulation linking economic and scientific centers to the periphery, creating a powerful engine of international development (Saxenian 2007).

### **Public Health and Medicine**

The cross-border migration of specialists in human health is among the most researched and discussed areas of work on transnational professions. This includes research on public health policymakers (Nilsson 2017), nurses (Silva 2018), social workers (Peter et al. 2017), and physicians. In the United States, 27% of physicians and surgeons and 35% of medical residents were foreign born in 2010 (Kerr et al. 2016, p. 90). In the United Kingdom’s National Health Service, approximately

26% of physicians and 14% of nurses are foreign born. Though members of the foreign-born group originate in more than 200 countries, it is noteworthy that the most common nations of origin by far are former British colonies or US protectorates in which individuals can readily acquire fluency in English through means such as legacy educational and legal systems, as well as mass media: These include India, Ireland, Pakistan, and the Philippines (Baker 2018). Similarly, about 20% of African-born physicians and 10% of African-born nurses live and work outside Africa; their emigration paths also appear to follow the opportunities afforded by language (Clemens & Pettersson 2008). It is noteworthy, however, that not all public health specialties fit this pattern of international mobility. For example, pharmacy remains stubbornly local, perhaps due to the need for practitioners to master the intricacies of local laws concerning dispensation of medicines (Chiarello 2011). This is the type of within-field variation that deserves more recognition and clarification in future research. A further important strand of research on health is on how doctors and lawyers form transnational professional movements to expand access to health care (Sending 2015, Harris 2017); that they do so without relying on formal organizational hierarchies suggests another topic worthy of future research, as discussed in greater detail in the concluding section of this article.

## OPEN ISSUES

One objective of this review is to identify points of contention in the current literature on transnational professionals and to bring out implications of these disputes for future research. Three areas of debate are particularly salient; all concern variations in transnational professionals' engagement with international work experience and the benefits they may derive from it. The key issues are agency, territoriality and inequality.

### Agency and Enactment Among Transnational Professionals

Within the long-standing sociological debate over the role of professionals as creators or enactors of rules, norms, and standards, recent research suggests several ways of situating transnational practitioners. On the one hand, seminal research on transnational practitioners has highlighted their diffusion of rules, norms, and standards globally (e.g., Fourcade 2006). But more recent studies foreground the creation of new rules, norms, and standards by transnational professionals engaged in "epistemic arbitrage" (Seabrooke 2014). Still more recent work suggests that transnational professionals are both creators and enactors: For example, Thistlethwaite & Paterson (2016) show accountants who both create governance rules and diffuse them globally through their professional and social networks. Through their work as standard-setters, transnational professionals not only bridge national and organizational boundaries but also establish the metrics and norms by which future activity will be judged (Timmermans & Epstein 2010, Stone 2013, Henriksen 2015). In this sense, transnational practitioners create the infrastructure and epistemological coherence integral to cross-border work.

At the same time, transnational professionals bridge levels of analysis by enacting rules, norms, and standards in their practices. This may involve creating a globalized localism by putting into international use an idea or practice that emerged from a specific place and time, or adapting a global rule, norm, or standard to local demands—thereby creating a localized globalism (Jenson & Santos 2000). Examples of globalized localisms include the diffusion of US corporate bankruptcy law by lawyers who applied internationally a set of rules and practices established for use in a single country; this led to development of a legal regime that has "permeated all global standards" (Carruthers & Halliday 2006, p. 534). Similarly, professional wealth managers made the

trust—a legal instrument invented in medieval England to protect individuals’ assets from taxation and seizure by creditors—into an indispensable tool of modern personal and corporate finance, adapted to the needs and legal regimes of dozens of different nations (Harrington 2017b). Trusts provide an example of a professional instrument that stands in a dynamic relationship between the local and global—changing in response to highly specific local demands, with the most popular innovations often diffusing through professional networks and professional societies to become international best practices. The wealth managers’ professional society has institutionalized these best practices through means such as a worldwide credentialing program and partnerships to deliver course content through universities (Harrington 2015a). This also serves to normalize and embed such practices in national professional associations.

These examples illustrate Fourcade & Savelsberg’s (2006) insights about the mutual structuration and inseparability of the global and local levels in the work of transnational professionals. In bridging these levels, professionals are at times rule-enactors and at times rule-creators, without any conflict necessarily arising between the two roles. In this sense, transnational practitioners fulfil Durkheim’s (Mauss & Durkheim 1937) prediction that professionals would become a stabilizing force in modern societies. Future research can move beyond the agency-enactment dichotomy by considering ways the two can be mutually enhancing.

### **Territory and Conditions of Mobility for Transnational Professionals**

Locating transnational professionals presupposes the existence of transnational spaces, which may include geographical places like the cosmopolitan cities examined by Mudge & Vauchez (2012), as well as the virtual territories created within multinational organizations (Maznevski & Chudoba 2000). Professionals often have a hand in creating and expanding those spaces. How they move through transnational spaces—and with what impact on society, economy, and politics—is a question that some of the most interesting recent research has begun to address. Some studies suggest that macrostructural forces, including the legacies of colonialism (Go 2011), play a key role in professional mobility; other research focuses on microlevel interpersonal networks and interactions as means of mobility (Harrington 2015a, Liu & Emirbayer 2016). Both the macrostructural and relational processes appear from initial findings to be dynamic, offering professionals opportunities to redraw territorial boundaries over time and to remake the links among the local, national, and transnational levels (Hanlon 2004, Harrington 2016); as Valverde (2015, p. 68) observed, “the game of scale is not zero-sum.” The future research agenda on transnational professionals must acknowledge “socio-spatial boundary work as *itself* an important stake and object of struggle in contemporary professional projects, with consequences for the distribution of tasks across concrete geographies of local, national and transnational scales” (Blok et al. 2018, p. 113).

In addition, future research must contend with the skepticism of scholars who point to the local embeddedness of many professionals and their projects (e.g., Klimkeit & Reihlen 2016, Spence et al. 2018, Young 2018). While there is widespread agreement with the idea that professionals are mobile, the debate centers on defining the territory of professional mobility. Some researchers argue that for the vast majority of professional elites, mobility occurs only within or between organizations, inside the borders of the individuals’ native countries. Professional success, they argue, is based on these individuals’ “extraordinary fit with their current work in their current place. Moving away would break that fit” (Young 2018, p. 73). Why, these researchers ask, would professionals undermine their own success by giving up their carefully cultivated home field advantage, including their local networks and their privileged positions in local status hierarchies?

Empirical evidence suggests that professionals originating in some countries rarely venture abroad in their careers; within those select national contexts, career success does not appear to



hinge on international experience. For instance, Andreotti et al. (2015) find that Italian, French and Spanish professionals are deeply rooted in dense local networks of social and political capital, based in their countries' urban centers: For them, international mobility provides no career advantages. Echoing this finding, Spence et al. (2018) find that French and Japanese professionals rarely gain career benefits from working outside their home countries. Those who do benefit from transnational mobility—particularly the Bangladeshis and the Chinese—only gain those benefits when they travel to work in specific countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. In fact, the researchers note that one of their Chinese informants “conflates the ‘global’ with the Anglophone West. . .in this sense, transnationalism is usurped by not just Occidentalism, but a very narrow Anglo-Saxon version thereof” (Spence et al. 2018, p. 240).

This suggests that language proficiency—particularly, but not exclusively, in English—may constitute an important driver of international mobility for professionals. Even skeptics like Young (2018, pp. 79–80) acknowledge the significance of language as part of a suite of cultural fit issues that delimit the opportunities available for professionals to work internationally. This may explain why studies like those of Spence et al. (2018) and Andreotti et al. (2015) find that professionals from Italy, France, and Spain so rarely go abroad for career advancement: Their language skills constitute a tight constraint on their opportunities; the three countries occupy the bottom rank among European nations in terms of English proficiency (see the 2019 English Proficiency Index global rankings at <https://www.ef.edu/epi/>). In contrast, the Englishization of many transnational professional spaces appears to confer structural advantages on practitioners with origins in the Anglosphere (Boussebaa et al. 2014). These early findings on mechanisms of transnational professional mobility require more detailed examination in future research.

In light of this and other unresolved issues, it may be theoretically generative to organize research on the professions according to its stance on the scope and pathways of mobility. **Figure 1**, below, classifies sociological theories of the professions according to whether they examine movement within or across organizations, and within or across countries.

As the figure suggests, the literature on the professions has moved over time from an exclusive focus on professionals' movements within individual, nation-based organizations (**Figure 1a**, e.g., Abbott 1988) to investigation of professionals' movements across organizations based in a particular country (**Figure 1b**, e.g., Abbott 2005). Subsequent scholarship laid the groundwork for research on transnational professionals by shifting attention to cross-border mobility within individual multinational organizations (**Figure 1c**, e.g., Suddaby et al. 2007). The present article

	Within national systems	Across national systems
Within organizations	<b>a</b> Classic analyses of the rise of professions and professional associations empowered by the nation-state. Focus on professional work driven by dynamic sequence of diagnosis, inference and treatment.	<b>c</b> Analyses of relationship between professions and external influences on professionalization across national settings. Focus on practitioners within multinational corporations, professional service firms, and international organizations.
Across organizations	<b>b</b> Analyses of practitioners and professional associations operating within national institutional settings. Focus on jurisdictional battles to justify professional privileges in labor market, and to establish ownership of issues against claims from rival professions.	<b>d</b> Analyses of professionals' ability to apply knowledge and influence across political and organizational boundaries. Focus on engagement with issues of global significance, including legitimization of their own expertise and identities.

**Figure 1**

Classification of professions scholarship.

extends this framework by examining professionals who move across both countries and organizations, amassing influence within transnational professional networks (Figure 1d, e.g., Seabrooke & Henriksen 2017). While the first two approaches remain current in national professions scholarship, the third and fourth have generated questions about professionals' ability to loosen their ties to local networks and institutional supports. Recent studies refer to trans-local professionals to acknowledge both local embeddedness and international mobility (Blok et al. 2018), as well as point out how transnational mobility is increasing differentiation within and between practitioners (Bellini & Maestripietri 2018). This emergent framework deserves further interrogation and elaboration by sociologists.

### Transnational Professionals and Inequality

Recent studies of transnational professionals suggest that the changing territorial scale of their work is both a manifestation of and a driver of inequality. This issue ties the frontier of transnational research to core themes in the sociology of the professions. Professionals' relationship to stratification has long been a scholarly preoccupation, whether focused on practitioners protecting and expanding their own privileges (Larson 1977, Freidson 1984) or those of their clients (Bourdieu 1996, Harrington 2012, Kauppi & Madsen 2013). This ongoing scholarly dialogue has been enriched by new work indicating that transnationality itself is a marker of elite status among professionals; their "privileged mobilities" (Polson 2016; see also Gil & Adamson 2011) permit them to access capital (economic, cultural, and social) and move it across borders.

Based on recent findings, we locate transnational professionals within a larger occupational space segmented by degree of autonomy from state and organizational control. This space includes the traditional state-licensed and territorially bound national professions—such as medicine and law—but also encompasses skilled trades, which are even more embedded in local environments and institutions, such as unions or guilds (for a conception of transnational guilds, see Bigo 2016). These groups can be arrayed based on their autonomy and the conceptual abstraction of their knowledge base, as shown in Figure 2. We place transnational professionals at the top of the continuum of autonomy, power, and privilege; the traditional, state-bound professionals occupy the



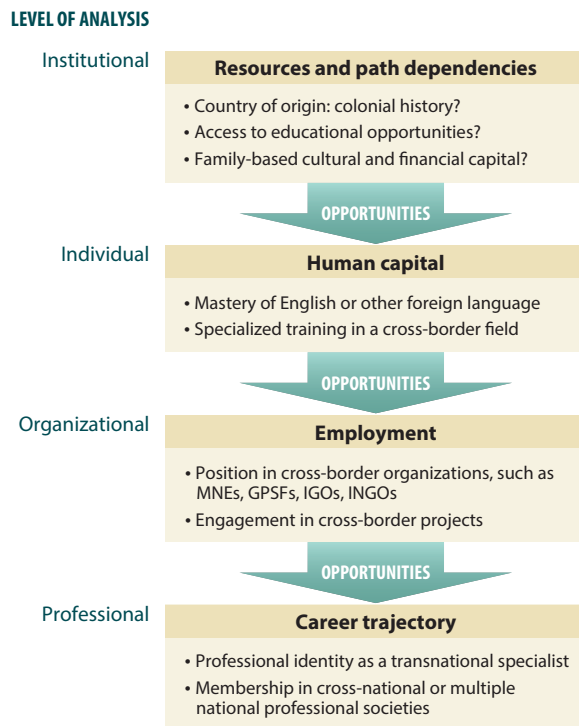
Figure 2

Occupational status and autonomy.

middle position; and the skilled occupations, such as trades governed by unions or guilds, are at the bottom. Arrows to either side of the figure indicate what changes with these occupational characteristics; for example, following Reskin & Roos (1990), we propose that status and pay increase with occupational autonomy.

**Figure 2** does not assume a necessary progression in professional careers. That is, it does not imply that all professionals are or will become transnational, or that doing cross-border work is a necessary prerequisite for career success. Recent research suggests that transnational professionals are the products of a series of cascading opportunity structures that can create portable privilege: endowments of capital that can be moved and accessed across nation-state boundaries. In some cases, these forms of portable privilege are purposely sought after by individuals seeking a transnational professional career (Bühlmann et al. 2013, Boussard 2018); this may include the deliberate pursuit of elite educational credentials, or of prestigious overseas assignments and multinational clients.

**Figure 3** suggests how this (re)production of a professional elite can unfold through access to and use of opportunity structures at varying levels of analysis. The end point of this process is the creation of a career that is recognized as transnational by the individual practitioner and internalized as part of their professional identity; this identity is represented externally through membership in cross-national professional bodies, or in multiple nation-bound professional societies. How individuals reach this end point is shaped partly by personal choice, but also by structural factors outside their control.



**Figure 3**

The making of transnational professionals through cascading opportunity. Abbreviations: GPSFs, global professional service firms; IGOs, intergovernmental organizations; INGOs, international nongovernmental organizations; MNEs, multinational enterprises.

Of particular analytic interest in future research is the contribution of individuals' country of origin to their opportunities to become transnational professionals. The few studies that speak to this issue point to factors such as colonial history, access to higher education, and the languages in which individuals can acquire proficiency as promising avenues of inquiry. These variables—which shape individuals' endowments of human, social, and cultural capital—are of course influenced by family resources, as well as by national origin. It is also a matter of individual agency whether to develop these capitals in ways that could enhance opportunities for professional privilege and a transnational career. A particularly important choice is whether to specialize in a field that is relevant across nation-state borders; for example, as recent research has shown, training as a nurse opens far more possibilities for an international career than qualifying as a pharmacist (Chiarello 2011). Within a given occupational category, such as law, individuals can alter their future opportunities by specializing in clients that are multinational—whether they are enterprises or business families (Dezalay & Garth 2011, Harrington & Strike 2018). Additional possibilities open up through employment with organizations that are transnational by design; examples include the Big 4 accounting firms or physics research centers (Carter & Spence 2014). Once an individual enters an organization engaged in transnational projects, it becomes easier to develop a career identity and trajectory as a transnational professional (Colic-Peisker 2010).

However, employment also represents an inflection point in which the reproduction of inequality within a profession is most visible, since obtaining such a privileged organizational position is often conditioned on ascribed characteristics and habitus (Ashley & Empson 2013, Harrington 2017a). In some fields, such as health care and computer science, it appears that characteristics like race represent relatively low barriers to international careers (Saxenian 2007, Clemens & Pettersson 2008). But being female remains a stubborn barrier to transnationality in the professions, particularly in the physical sciences (Ioannidis 2004) and finance (Boussard 2018). What Young (2018) terms the stickiness of social ties for locally embedded professionals may have a more powerful impact on the careers of women than of men, due to institutionalized gender roles such as the caregiving responsibilities disproportionately borne by women. Such constraints on transnationality, along with the complex series of opportunities that precede international careers (as shown in **Figure 3**), deserve sustained attention in future research.

## IMPLICATIONS AND AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research stream reviewed in this article invites us to consider professions released from their long-standing position of analytical subordination to states and organizations. If we accept the mounting evidence of empirical studies showing that public- and private-sector bureaucracies, ranging from national governments to professional service firms and associations, are no longer the dominant sources of empowerment and constraint for some practitioners, what does that imply? How would an expanded sociology of the professions, which accounts for transnationality, differ from a state-centric paradigm in its concepts, methods, and practical implications?

First on the agenda must be reframing sociological models of the relationship among professions, states, and firms. This reassessment should acknowledge the broader systemic context that Barley & Kunda (2004) have termed the collapse of bureaucracies, in which both states and market-based organizations have become leaner and flatter; this process has led public- and private-sector organizations to shed whole layers of hierarchy once staffed by long-term professional employees, and to turn instead to outsourcing and contract employment. This has turned many elite professionals into a type of itinerant workers (Evans et al. 2004) whose enforced mobility resembles that of journeymen in the ancient guild system—except that the territory of this new itinerancy has been scaled up to the global level. The massive expansion of consultancy communities for

transnational professional work has accelerated this (O'Mahoney & Sturdy 2016, Heusinkveld et al. 2018), with support from powerful states and global professional service firms (Boussebaa et al. 2012, Seabrooke & Sending 2019). Such transnational professionals can empower themselves through the promotion of abstract managerialism (Meyer & Bromley 2013), in which claims to universality promote the diffusion and application of expert knowledge.

This insight implies that when formal organizations no longer dominate the opportunity structure, professional networks will take primacy: that is, “who you know” will become increasingly important relative to the credentials and labor market positions that institutions like states, universities, and multinational enterprises can offer. This shifts the burden of renewing and diffusing the knowledge base that is the source of professionals’ power from firms and professional associations to networks of practitioners (Barley & Kunda 2004); those networks may also have to take on the monitoring and sanctioning of misconduct—a problem that professional associations and state bureaucracies have failed to address adequately (Harrington 2018). The evidence so far suggests that when transnational professionals are faced with changing moral imperatives, they use the opportunity for strategic repositioning without moral reckoning (Radcliffe et al. 2018). Whether practitioner networks are robust and resource-rich enough to sustain the costs of undertaking those tasks is an empirical question worthy of inclusion in the future research agenda for the sociology of the professions.

Methodologically, these practical implications and shifts in conceptual focus foreground the need for two distinctive data collection and analysis strategies. First, ethnographic immersion (Harrington 2015b, 2017c)—a technique based on anthropological fieldwork—has proven particularly enlightening in the study of social and cultural capital as facilitators of mobility for transnational professionals. Indeed, the sociology of the professions would benefit from greater attention to work by anthropologists on transnational professionals: Research in this stream has steadily built theory on key issues relevant across the social sciences, such as the micro–macro link in globalization. For example, recent ethnographies of development professionals have shown how their “traveling rationalities” (Mosse 2011, p. 3) facilitate the upward flow of political and economic authority from national governments to international agencies (Holmes & Marcus 2005); in contrast, highly granular data from participant observation with financial traders have exposed the limits of social and cultural capital to cross borders, creating discontinuities between the local and transnational levels of analysis (Hertz 1998). Thus, while the sociology of the professions has generally remained siloed from the anthropology of expertise, future research would benefit from building a stronger connection between the two.

Network analysis and sequence analysis also merit a more prominent place in the future research agenda, based on the insights they have provided in tracing how transnational professionals operate. Network analysis has been applied to professional communities to examine the transmission of ideas and practices (Helgadóttir 2016, Thistlethwaite & Paterson 2016), as well as the alignment of status or normative positions in transnational institution building (Lazega et al. 2017). Sequence analysis (Abbott 1995, Blanchard et al. 2014) has been used to investigate how professionals acquire influence by following particular educational and career paths (Nilsson 2017, Ellersgaard et al. 2019). The combination of the two analytic methods has provided insights into the relationship between career structures and network positions in shaping the influence transnational professionals exert on issues (Henriksen & Seabrooke 2016). Future research can build on these advances.

A second agenda item stems from the first: investigating the production and maintenance of transnationality in professionals’ careers and their institutional work (Suddaby & Viale 2011, Muzio et al. 2013). In particular, we need to understand how some individuals are able to “go global” (Harrington 2015a), while others with similar endowments of human, social, and cultural

capital are not. For example, future research should examine the underrepresentation of women in cross-border professional work: Does it stem from limits on women's educational opportunities, depriving women of skills that would make them candidates for international careers, or does the problem arise from gendered caregiving responsibilities that make geographical separation from family of origin more culturally, emotionally, and economically problematic for women than for men? More generally, the research agenda in the sociology of the professions should prioritize specification of the opportunity structures and career trajectories characteristic of transnational practitioners. The current literature draws heavily on Anglo-American sources, with their distinctive conceptions of capital, mobility, and status; it is important for scholars to identify ways in which this may have limited earlier interpretations in research on transnational professionals, and how such limits can be acknowledged or transcended going forward. Methodologically, this agenda item implies seeking out data and analytical frameworks that center women as well as practitioners from outside the Anglosphere. Such an approach could be highly generative for building and challenging theories of the professions that encompass transnational work.

A third and final item for a future research agenda is to map the geographies of transnational professional practice. The contemporary sociology of the professions should be able to identify the spaces created by and for cross-border practitioners. These spaces include institutions conceived from their inception as transnational, such as offshore tax havens, multinational enterprises, and some scientific research centers. Also important, however, are the liminal and legally privileged spaces where global microstructures (Knorr Cetina & Bruegger 2002)—like international trading floors within national banks, or free trade zones outside airports, or foreign consulates in residential neighborhoods—allow transnational activity to flourish in territories and organizational settings not designed for that purpose. Such spaces are important because physical mobility and face-to-face encounters (as opposed to purely virtual methods) are essential to the work and network-building of transnational professionals (Storme et al. 2017). Of course, such research must account for change and variation. For example, recent research shows transnational medical professionals rescaling their work by importing health practices from the Global South into precarious communities in the United States (Hanrieder 2019); future research could examine more broadly the geographic diffusion patterns of professional practices.

Similar questions could be asked about the movements of transnational professionals themselves: While they often cluster in a handful of cities where cross-border institutions are based, such as New York and London, the growth of nativism and legalized hostility to foreigners is already shifting these professionals' migration patterns (Bennhold 2017, Weise & Rai 2018). Such changes can be transformative for states and other institutions, as the influx of European Jewish scientists to the United States during World War II demonstrated. The sociology of the professions thus requires a methodology that can help scholars map the geographies of transnationality, as well as facilitating prediction and testing of theoretical propositions that will move the field forward. Geographic information systems, which are used to allocate health professionals to a region (Juarez et al. 2008) and to support project management among urban planners (Dennis 2006), offer a promising way to map patterns and changes in the territorial distribution of cross-border professionals. New research is also drawing on social media data, such as LinkedIn profiles, to map out where professionals are employed (Murphy & Stausholm 2017).

As these reflections suggest, our review of transnational professionals takes place against a backdrop of increasing instability at the state level, as well as in the corporate world. In this light, it is not wholly surprising to observe a resurgence of the kind of free professionals—endowed with a high degree of autonomy from government and corporate control—that scholars first documented in the 1930s. Over time, as sociologists incorporate transnational activity into the study of professions, it may emerge that the proliferation of cross-border practice is a sign of and response

to turmoil in the larger social system. As Durkheim (Mauss & Durkheim 1937) noted, professions exert a stabilizing influence on society, competing with the power of governments and firms. Thus, the weakening of states and nation-bound enterprises creates opportunities for professionals to take on a larger role as institution-builders through their “disinterested agency for general or universal principles” (Meyer 2010, p. 7). These conditions are accentuated in the contemporary globalized environment, in which the “liquefaction” (Bauman 2000, p. 70) of established hierarchies favors actors able to move fluidly across boundaries. We can thus expect transnational professionals to occupy an increasingly significant role in both social life and sociological research.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For feedback on this article, we thank our colleagues Valerie Bousard, Mehdi Boussebaa, John L. Campbell, Marc Dixon, Laura Empson, James Faulconbridge, Stefanie Gustafsson, Damian Hodgson, Harsh Kumar Jha, Ian Kirkpatrick, Daniel Muzio, W. Richard Scott, and Roy Suddaby. Harrington’s time was supported by Danish Research Council grant #4003-00026 and Seabrooke’s time by the European Research Council grant #694943.

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