

Merger III

OR?GASM

The Operational Research Society (ORS) in 1973 proposed a professional register, 'the Fellowship'; many of the arguments used then against the Fellowship are relevant to statisticians and the IOS/RSS merger. Reproduced here is an article from "OR?GASM" of November 1973. The fellowship was voted against by the ORS itself, but was nonetheless set up, as a separate body which is now increasingly allied to the ORS.

THE REGISTER/FELLOWSHIP IN PERSPECTIVE

Operational Research is not the first discipline or group to consider professionalizing itself. We can learn from the experience of other professions rather than think our problems (and opportunities) are unique. Studies of existing professions abound, and their conclusions are relevant.

Professions in Theory

The general argument for setting up a professional body follows these lines. A service is offered to clients which matters deeply to those clients, but which is of such technical complexity that the client is unable to assess the competence of any particular practitioner. The only group which can assess this competence is the practitioners' professional peer-group. They therefore take on the job of guaranteeing professional competence, and try to persuade the public that any practitioner with their seal of approval is a safe bet.

The professional body therefore tries to establish an aura of public trust. It seeks visible autonomy from any outside interest group which might wish to tamper with standards. It issues 'licenses' to practice which it hopes the State will under-write, giving the professional body a legal monopoly of the right to practice. It sets up a code of ethics for practitioners.

Professions; warts and all

So much for the theory. The practice is perhaps more relevant. Take the code of ethics, for example. It is used as propaganda to persuade the public that their interests will be safe in the hands of accredited practitioners. It is used for the idealistic socialization of new recruits. It is not used except in very rare circumstances to eject the incompetent. (The 'immoral' yes, the politically radical yes, the incompetent, no.) Since in most cases entry requirements are not especially tough either, the 'guarantee' of competence is something of a sham.

So why the complex entry 'licensing' procedure? Many professions use this in blatant self-interest, to restrict entry of competitors to a field where they have a monopoly, and so keep status and financial rewards at a high level. They also use the apprenticeship period as a filter to deter and weed out individuals who are likely to challenge the established norms of the profession.

Most professional bodies are monuments to orthodoxy. Unconventional techniques are discouraged, or even in some cases outlawed. And not only can no one outside the profession practice it, but no one inside the profession is supposed to explain its mysteries in ways the public can understand. The practitioner who cuts through the jargon undercuts the prestige and the market position of the profession as a whole. What they want is mystification, not popularisation.

What a firmly based professional institution can do is give a handful of leading members a platform from which they can gain access to the corridors of power. The president of a 'Royal Institution of Chartered Operational Researchers' could be sure of a knighthood as well as a seat at the Athenaeum. He would sit on Government committees and make valuable personal contacts. The elite of OR would merge in with the other elites of the country - which means that OR's governing body would absorb the common wisdom of the establishment, and adjust the profession's policies accordingly.

Does OR fit the theory?

There are in any case two major assumptions underlying the argument for professionalisation which just don't fit OR. The first is that OR workers are freestanding professionals, like solicitors or doctors in private practice on their own account or in a small partnership. But operational researchers, with rare exceptions, are members of (technically) bureaucratic organisations - large industrial firms, or consulting groups. The OR worker is expected to show loyalty, not to his professional community but to his organisation. Rewards are given not for sticking to professional principles, but for obedience to his bosses. So the operational researcher within a bureaucratic organisation is subject to conflicting pressures. It would be nice, but simple-minded, to think that the professional organisation would stand up for its dissenting member when in conflict with his employer. But this just doesn't seem to happen in other professions - usually the reverse is the case. This is because (as we shall see) the professional organisation itself is dependent on the employers, and has largely accepted their values.

The second assumption on which the call for professionalisation is based is that those practicing OR have a 'duty to the public' to guarantee competence. But just as the OR worker is not the free-standing professional of the theory, so the client is no longer a helpless individual. Some individual managers may have difficulty controlling their OR activities because they can't understand the technicalities. But by and large, the clients are massively powerful organisations with the resources to command expertise of many kinds at all levels. The public in danger of being mistreated or mystified by OR is not the client organisation, but the groups and individuals (workers, consumers, local residents, unemployed, sick etc.) whose lives may be affected by the projects operational researchers work on. Professional codes may pay lip service to this need for social responsibility (the revised Fellowship scheme apparently does so), but the whole motivation behind the thrust for professionalisation is the need for corporate responsibility. These are often in conflict, because the interests of corporations and other large organisations are so narrowly restricted (to profit, for example) that other considerations are subordinated. In this case to make OR more competent is just to

make it socially irresponsible.

How the fellowship will distort OR practice

Earlier ?OR? documents (available on request) have gone into some of the 'socially irresponsible' effects of the Fellowship/Register proposal at length. So there is no need here to go into detail about how it will impose social control on junior OR workers; how it will impose conformity on OR training; or how it will rigidify the boundaries of the subject ("we don't want jumped-up systems analysts claiming to be operations researchers" our president states in a New Scientist interview.)

Perhaps there is one further point worth emphasising. If the Fellowship/Register takes off it will undoubtedly replace the ORS as the main body of OR. Who controls the Fellowship will dominate OR. And who will they be, these F.O.R.s (perhaps to be followed by Super-F.O.R.'s or even Meta-F.O.R.s) who will govern the Fellowship? They'll be our super-bosses, and meta-bosses. But that's not all. The British Computer Society last month was bailed out of its financial difficulties by £5,000 each from ICL and IBM. How long before the OR Fellowship, on a much smaller base, is similarly beholden to our paymasters?

After-Thought Robert Owen wrote this in 1841:

Professions all have "an apparent, direct interest, in opposition to the masses; an interest to keep them in ignorance, that they may be, the more easily imposed upon, and made subservient to the supposed interest of the profession". "

