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Field from a Sociological Perspective

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Understanding the Professionalization of the Culinary Field from a Sociological Perspective

By Dr. Marta Elvira¹

“I soon saw, as I considered every aspect of the pleasures of the table, that something better than a cookbook should be written about them; and there is a great deal to say about those functions which are so ever-present and so necessary, and which have such a direct influence on our health, our happiness, and even on our occupations.”

(Brillat-Savarin, 2000:20)

As Brillat-Savarin brilliantly stated over two centuries ago, the very necessity of nourishment might explain why societies often take for granted a fundamental aspect of human culture. Yet gathering and sharing meals is a central social action with important consequences for physical and psychological wellbeing, as well as for the structure of occupations in society. Much has been written about the relationship between food, health, and culture. Less attention has been paid to understanding how culinary occupations have evolved and what the culinary profession brings to society and culture.

The recent trend toward an increasing professionalizing of the chef’s role within all forms of foodservice organizations, especially in terms of how women and multicultural subgroups are advancing into upper level managerial roles during the past two decades, brings to the fore the changing face of professional identity for chefs. This complex theme is ripe for research applying sociological frameworks (e.g., cultural theories) to study the evolution of culinary career paths. Sociology's insights concern individual behavior in the context of their social environment. Thus, it can illuminate our understanding of social behavior around food, eating, cooking, and dietary lifestyles. What and how we eat, who prepares it and how it is prepared tells us what we value and who we are as a society.

Sociologists have studied food and meals mostly in the past two decades (Mennell et al., 1992, Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). They have also studied extensively the professionalization of various professional service fields such as law, medicine, and accounting (Abbott, 1988). Relatively less is known about the content or the social organization of culinary work (Fine, 1996; Ruhlman, 1997; and Simons, 2004 are welcome exceptions). In *The Invention of the Restaurant*, Trubek (2000: xi) affirms: “Often missing were the voices of those who made the food, the men and women who labored every day to transform raw ingredients into sumptuous meals. Few if any, have documented the history of cooks or chefs de cuisine; other than cookbooks and anecdotes, the past is mute. And great meals, unlike great buildings leave few traces. [...] We don’t know where the food came from, who cooked it, how the diners enjoyed their meal.” One way of approaching this research opportunity is by examining culinary work, knowledge, and practice, together with culinary experts’ identities, values and beliefs, and the structure of culinary occupations’ training, credentialing, and careers.

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The renewed appreciation of the central role that culinary work plays in modern society springs partly from an increasing value given to human's dependence and its cultural impact, as well as the jobs that address those fundamental human needs (Kass, 1999). "As earthly beings, we are bound by natural laws; they support our only powers. We must still eat, drink, breathe, and die." (Symons, 2004, 341). Among sociologists, cooking has been typically viewed as secondary to its cultural aspects, overlooking (a) those who perform the cooking, (b) what cooks actually do, and (c) how their work is organized. Below I explore how to understand further culinary arts as service professions for an enduring appreciation of the occupations involved.

Abbott's theory of professionalization in *The System of Professions* (1988) provides the most widely respected framework to advance this knowledge. For our purposes it suffices to define professions as Abbott (1988) does: "Exclusive groups of individuals applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases." In this view professions are not closed systems: some exhibit diverse forms and are hard to categorize. In fact, culinary occupations are included in various industries, categorizations and classifications even in existing Department of Labor and government statistics. Cooking as an occupation exhibits a variety of job titles, employing organizations etc. One can potentially explain culinary evolution as a craft (guild roots), a profession (recognized by certifications, degrees), and a science (research chefs, food science).

The professionalization process depends on several factors in Abbott's framework, including:

- Professional work: nature of the tasks
- Organization of knowledge (legitimization, university programs)
- Claim of jurisdiction over an occupational turf
- Implications of exclusion and mechanisms of jurisdiction (e.g., certifications)
- Internal differentiation and stratification: client differentiation
- Cultural /contextual environment
- Workplace structure and internal divisions of labor.

Starting with the first point, professional work: What do Cooks do? Symons describes their work from multiple angles. First it is a work of acquisition concerning food supplies; second it entails distribution, a process in which we share food as well as lives; third, there is alchemy, the change process inherent to cooking where the science comes in; and finally, art, given that a cook is "an artist whose single vocation is to make others' lives happier" (Symons, 2004: 55).

Beyond the tasks performed by cooks, there is a need for legitimizing the structure of expertise over their work. As Abbott notes, the power of professions depends on the power of their knowledge systems, their abstracting ability, of defining old problems in new ways. Professions control their knowledge and skill in two ways: a) technique per se, where occupations typically using this are called crafts; and b) abstract knowledge, from which the practical skills derive. Typically techniques can be delegated to other personnel, whereas abstraction is the characteristic that best identifies the professions. "...The rising amount and complexity of professional knowledge, and the new types of legitimacy claimed for that knowledge, and the rise of the university has tied the professions to a central cultural institution of their societies" (Abbott, 1988: 177). As in other

occupations, cooking has evolved from a type of craft learning through certifications to university degrees.

Together with this expertise and legitimation evolution is the developing cultural and social environment. “Changes in the system of professions begin sometimes in external events, sometimes within the professions themselves. Tasks can be created or destroyed by changes in technology and organizations. New groups can emerge through client differentiation or through the cultural forces” (Abbott, 1988). Very broadly, the occupation has evolved from the domestic arena through royalty and secretive culinary arts (e.g., Escoffier/Ritz) and expansion of culinary education (especially after World War II), passing by the home realm of Julia Child and Martha Stewart and to Alice Waters, to revealed culture of restaurant kitchens. As with the rest of our culture, we’re now focusing increasingly on community sustainable agriculture, cookbooks, celebrity chefs, and mass media dissemination.

These cultural changes relate to the evolving nature of the clientele served by culinary occupations, which in turn stratifies the profession internally and shows in job title differentiation. The chef’s role in an industrial setting to meet “the demands of work that are rooted in a symbiotic service and production culture--from an organizational perspective--hinges upon how chefs must learn to compromise many different and competing demands that incorporate the aesthetics of culinary arts with the temporal constraints of “client demand, organizational efficiency, resource management, and segmentation” (Fine, 1996: p.195).

In closing, the culinary profession is worth taking deeper look into. Understanding where work comes from, who does it, and how they retain claim to the knowledge involved, helps understand why professions evolve as they do. Each aspect of the professionalization process requires study and is part of Lexington College’s team research agenda. Here I have briefly outlined how using sociological approaches can illuminate the value and status of culinary occupations in society. Advancing the understanding of cooking from the “stardom” of celebrity television to the roots of its social foundation will help place culinary occupations within the realm of professions.

Looking back at human and culinary history, it seems fitting to end with Symons’ words of admiration:

“We risk cutting ourselves off from nature, society and culture. Yet to be truly human, we need to become better cooks, and cooks of erudition and taste, practical and generous...

As people who embody the human virtues of warmth and generosity, cooks warrant our gratitude. As people who command an enormous range of knowledge and skills, they demand to be admired. As people committed to our pleasures, cultural development and survival, they are to be worshipped.” (Symons, 2004: 351)

Note: This article is based on a joint presentation at the Balance Diet, Balanced Life conference with Dr. Michele Grottola (George Brown College, Toronto, Canada).