

# A critical analysis from the Global South on student affairs as a profession

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## Abstract

This article discusses the nature of the student affairs professionalization project, by analyzing the discourses evident in and legitimized through the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)*. The analysis is driven by three research questions: What is the extent of the journal's engagement with the terms profession, professionalism, professional, and professionalization? How are these terms used in the journal and how do these uses relate to the social justice imperative in Student Affairs and Services (SAS)? Overall, we find a stronger social justice discourse in comparison to the discourse on SAS as a profession. Furthermore, the professionalization discourse draws strongly on notions of professional traits and high-level knowledge and skills. Finally, this article considers opportunities for a scholarship on the development of SAS as a profession and further theoretical development of the Sociology of Professions (SoP) from the Global South.

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the nature of the student affairs professionalization project, by critically analyzing the discourses evident and implicitly legitimized in the publications of a scholarly journal in the field, that is, the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)*. The journal is an important platform for the analysis of efforts to professionalize as well as claims to professionalism, as through its publications, it creates a discourse around the concept of profession and professionalism, documenting specific collections of cases which illustrate and model ways for the field to professionalize. While there are many other activities and processes that contribute to the wider professionalization project, the scope of this article is limited to this investigation.

To inform our analysis, we reflect on foundational and conceptual debates in the literature on professions, which recognize the importance of the ideological discourse on professions, as it is re/produced through certain activities and platforms. This is followed by a brief overview of the methodology, driven by three research questions: (1) What is the

extent of the journal's engagement with the focus terms? (2) How are the terms profession, professionalism, professional, and professionalization used in the journal? (3) How do these uses relate to the social justice imperative in Student Affairs and Services (SAS)? We then present different analyses of articles published in the journal. The first is a bird's eye view on the extent of engagement with the focal concepts, which is followed by an in-depth analysis of the discourse around SAS as a profession promoted in a sample of articles. We also reflect on the social justice aims of the SAS domain and show how these fare in the professionalization discourse in the journal. In the final section we consider whether our analysis suggests SAS to be "professionalizing from within" and point out opportunities for scholarship on SAS as a profession and as contribution to further theoretical development of the Sociology of Professions (SoP) from the Global South.

## **The *Journal of Student Affairs* in Africa and its objectives**

The *JSAA* was established in 2012/13 and published its double launch issue themed "The professionalization of Student Affairs in Africa" in December 2013. On the journal's website and in every issue, it is stated boldly it "aims to contribute to the professionalization of student affairs in African higher education" (*JSAA*, 2022). In the launch issue, the editorial executive claimed a "growing interest in the professionalization of student affairs in Africa." They noted recent developments in Africa, including a shift from "on-the-job training" to "high-level skills requirements to enter the profession"; a growing number of graduate programs focusing on higher education (HE) studies and SAS; new and existing centers of research to develop a body of knowledge and expertise; a growing number of SAS professional associations; increasing number of SAS conferences to share professional reflection on best practice and practice-relevant research, and; a budding of publications on SAS from the continent (Luescher-Mamashela, Moja, & Schreiber, 2013, pp. viii-ix).

To support these developments, it was argued that "an independent, international scholarly journal," dealing with "the theory, policy and practice" of the profession, was required (Luescher-Mamashela, Overmeyer, & Schreiber, 2013, p. 5). The *JSAA* editors sought to establish scholarly legitimacy.

To contribute to professionalization, establishing scholarly legitimacy is critical and the *JSAA* editor embarked on this *inter alia* by establishing "a prestigious editorial executive and international editorial board," publishing "high quality content," having "rigorous internal quality controls," and seeking "accreditation, patronage, endorsement, and affiliation" (Luescher-Mamashela, Overmeyer, & Schreiber, 2013, pp. 14-15). For a South Africa-based journal, perhaps the most important indicator is that it received accreditation by the Academy of Sciences of South Africa in 2017, certifying it as a bona fide scholarly journal included on the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) list of research subsidy earning journals. The authors of the journal hail from across the South African and African university landscape, including prestigious institutions such as the University of Cape Town and University of Ghana, and contributions from relevant research centers such as the National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of Johannesburg. About 10% of contributors are from outside the African continent, including France, Germany, United Kingdom, United States, United Arab Emirates, and the Philippines, to mention but a few. This is in a context where *JSAA* is the only dedicated journal on student affairs per se in Africa (alongside general higher education and education journals), and one among a dozen or so journals worldwide dedicated to SAS scholarship (most of which are in the Global North). By April 2021, the journal had a citation count of close to 1000 for 168 items captured on its profile. Over 100 articles had achieved at least one citation with the

top three articles respectively having 86, 72, and 42 recorded citations on Google Scholar. Regarding those and other indicators, it therefore appears that *JSAA* has established itself as a respectable building block in the professionalization of SAS in Africa, and thus a highly relevant vehicle to analyze and critique the discourse of student affairs as a profession.

## Professions, professionalism, and professionalization

Whereas, for the large part, many have rejected the definition of profession as a “sterile exercise” (Johnson, 1972), it is important to engage with the concepts of profession, professional, professionalism, and professionalization ahead of an analysis of the discourse surrounding them. Thus, we reflect on the prevailing debates on (1) what a profession is; (2) who decides the criteria; (3) what professionalism is; and (4) what does it mean to be professionalized. It is important to highlight the contested nature of these concepts as we interpret the journal’s positioning to their theoretical development. A brief synopsis of the development of the literature on professions illustrates the kinds of analytical pitfalls that must be borne in mind in their application.

The Sociology of Professions (SoP) literature examines professions as a type of occupational group that is successful in wielding forms of privilege, power, and status across a range of societal institutions (notably in relation to the market and to the state) over, or at certain points in, time. A profession is commonly understood to refer to an occupational group that performs autonomously, has a particular relationship with society, and whose practitioners are governed by a relatively exclusive form of knowledge and a code of ethics. As a profession manages knowledge that other individuals need, there tends to be an asymmetric relationship between professionals and the users of their services. In traditional theories of professions, a strong connection exists amongst the professions, higher education, a scientific knowledge base, and a code of ethics. However, arguments on the complexities of practical and tacit knowledge have come to play a central role in contemporary discussions and engagement about professions.

The SoP literature can be categorized into three stages of development which illustrate why certain areas of investigation became more salient over time and others discarded. The first stage of development, referred to as the *traditional trait approach* (or taxonomic approach), claimed professions could be defined by cataloging particular traits and attributes that are not held by occupations (e.g., Greenwood, 1957; Pellegrino, 1983; Wilensky, 1964). Scientific knowledge and specialized expertise, particularly, were seen as key defining features in these accounts. The literature was based on two core propositions: (1) Professions are distinct from other middle-class occupations, empirically and analytically and (2) the presence of professions in civil society uniquely supports social order. Saks (2012) noted in this respect,

“Occupations with very esoteric and complex knowledge and expertise of great importance to society were usually seen as being granted a high position in the social system with state sanction in return for protecting the public and/or clients.”

The medical profession was often used to represent such a prototype. (p. 2)

These writers also suggested a common professionalization process where relatively few occupations complete all the steps in the process to achieve the standing of an established profession.

The second phase in the literature, termed the *revisionist triad*, rejected the idea that professions could be distinguished from occupations. Writers did so by showing that, rather than distinct differences existing between high-status professions and other occupations, there are many parallels. Often, low status occupations (such as garbage collectors or prostitutes) were used to discredit claims that only a limited number of professions were worthy of such a title. Here arguments of the forces of de-professionalization also played a role. For example, Braverman (1974) argued that tasks that would be seen as the preserve of a particular profession were being broken down by managerialist strategies, and could easily be performed by other groups, or became subject to a division of labor that would circumvent the high-status of professions. Furthermore, there was also a recognition that professions can be a malevolent force in civil society with detrimental consequences for order and stratification, exacerbating hierarchies and socio-economic inequities.

While agreeing with many of the critics of the second phase, Abbott (1988) was influential in arguing that the study of professions must recognize them as a system and focus on how occupational groups define, establish, and maintain boundaries or lay claim to certain jurisdictions. Abbott focused on the activities by which occupational groups asserted jurisdiction to the point that they would gain the right (by society, the market, and the state) to offer “diagnosis, inference and treatment” on a specific scope of problems. As this view explicitly accommodates changes to the nature of work and new contestations between occupational groups trying to claim parts or entire scopes of practice, his seminal work continues to inform current research in the field (Wildschut & Meyer, 2017).

More recent literature on professions attempts to synthesize the tensions from the first two phases in recognizing definitional integrity as important but being wary of the functionalist implications (Scuili, 2005). Here arguments are for moving beyond a professional framework (Burns, 2007), focusing more at the micro-level of professionals and their workplaces (Brock et al., 2014) as well as the discourse of professionalism. This scholarship focuses on professionalism as a value and ideology and continues to debate whether the terms profession and professionalism are useful and remain theoretically relevant (Adams, 2010; Saks, 2012; Svarc, 2016). Thus, the terms profession, professionalism and professionalization are contested, depending critically on socio-economic and historical development within a specific context which means that no “template” or model for successful professionalization can easily be distilled. They must be applied in a manner that engages the conceptual gaps, and continuous critique of the nature of professionalization is required to ensure that social and structural exclusions are not recreated or maintained.

## Research questions and methodology

Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011) assert that understanding professions requires understanding first, the role certain actors play in the professionalization processes and, second, the way they may influence new forms of professionalism and models of professionalization. In this article we investigate the SAS professionalization project in the Global South by analyzing the contribution of the JSAA.

Three research questions have been distilled from the article objective to guide the inquiry: (1) What is the extent of the journal’s engagement with the focus terms? (2) How are the terms profession, professionalism, professional, and professionalization employed in the journal? (3) How do these applications relate to the social justice imperative in SAS?

The data for this study are the nine volumes containing 17 published issues and 207 substantive items of publication of the JSAA from 2013 to 2021. Our analysis started by

importing the items of publication (including prefaces, editorials, peer-reviewed research articles, peer-reviewed reflective practice articles, campus and conference reports, professional notices, and book reviews), into Atlas.ti 9 to run a comprehensive content analysis of the selected terms. Atlas.ti offers the advantage of organizing, managing, and analyzing large quantities of qualitative data.

Our analytic process employed both a deductive and inductive approach to the development and application of codes and themes to condense the selected data. Using Atlas.ti's automated search function, 115 published items were identified that deal with the notions of professionalism, profession, professional or professionalization. Of these, 22 publications were selected as the sample for analysis by excluding all documents that had less than eight mentions of these terms (see Table 1). This sample is made up of 12 research articles, six reflective practice articles, three editorials, and one interview and dialogue article to constitute the database for the discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis aims to uncover discursive, interactional, and/or rhetorical context (Macmillan, 2005), making explicit the unspoken, lived notions surrounding power (Foucault, 1976) through a "set of methods and theories for investigating language in use and language in social contexts" (Wheterell et al., 2001, p. 1). Our focus here is analyzing discourse as realized through text, while acknowledging that it is also about objects, subjects, and meaning-making, in reference to other discourses, reflective of a particular way of speaking, and historically located (Parker, 1992).

Our method was to read each paper in depth, paying attention to the deployment of our focus terms (i.e., profession, professionalism, professional, and professionalization) so as to identify what meaning could be discerned from their contextual usage and thus what discourse it established or part-took in. We then reflected on whether and how these meanings related to the discourse on professions, as discussed above.

## Constructing the discourse of SAS as a profession

The content analysis of all 207 substantive items of the publication provides a bird's eye view of the engagement of the *JSAA* in the SAS professionalization discourse. Figure 1 shows that, since the journal's inception in 2013, there have been over 891 mentions of the term profession and its derivatives. It also shows that there are great disparities between the different volumes and issues of the journal in respect to engagement with these terms.

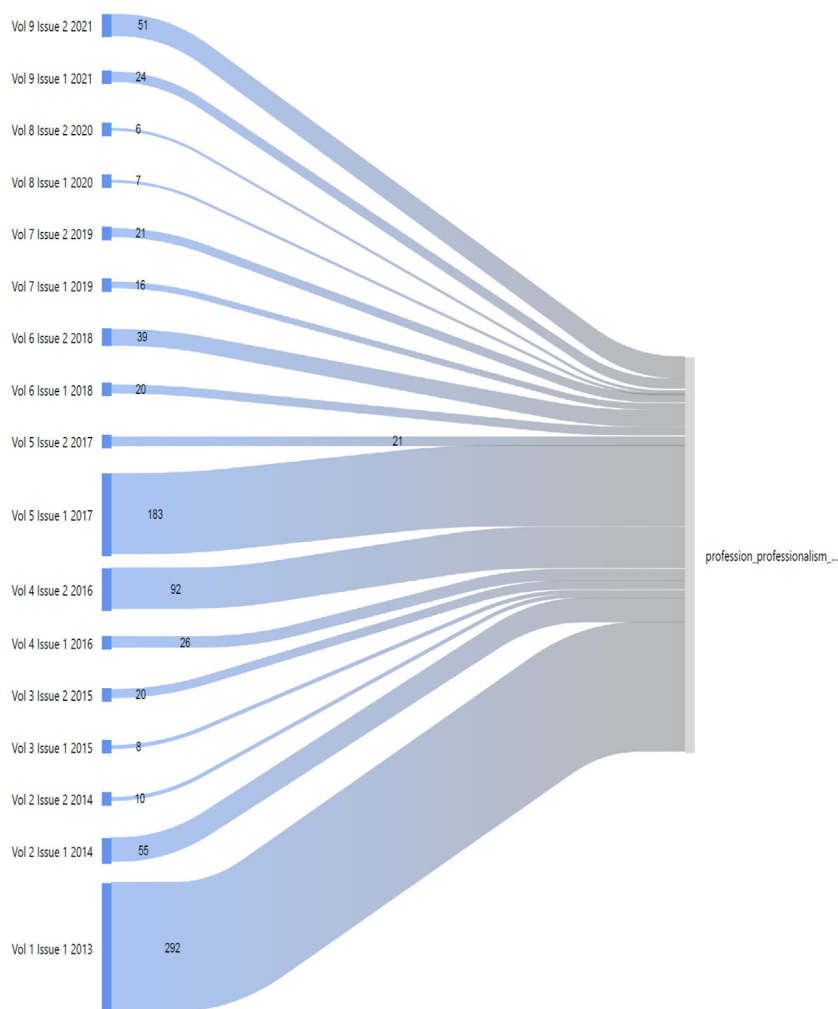
Figure 1 indicates that the *JSAA* launch issue themed "The professionalization of student affairs in Africa" accounts for almost a third of all mentions of the search words. This is followed by *JSAA*'s global issue of 2017 – "Voices from across the globe," which contains 183 mentions and the 2016 volume on "Student affairs in complex contexts" (92 mentions). Whereas almost half (7 of 16) of the issues have been guest-edited, only one of the five issues with the most mentions are guest-edited suggesting that those issues edited by the founding editors are more actively engaged in the construction of the SAS professionalization discourse. The diagram also highlights an ebb and flow in focus on professionalization across issues.

## Deconstructing the SAS professionalization discourses

By focusing on the sample of 22 articles with the most mentions of focal terms (see Table 1), we were able to build on the general analysis by paying in-depth, critical attention to the manner in which the terms were deployed to uncover the discourse implied. First, we considered whether a document attempted to foster a particular perspective of

TABLE 1 Sample for analysis.

Sample number	Title	Mentions	Type
1.	Professionalization of student affairs educators in China: History, challenges, and solutions	104	Reflective practice
2.	The role of research and scholarship in the professionalization of student affairs	89	Research article
3.	A proposed model for the continued professionalization of student affairs in Africa	79	
4.	Socialisation and professional identity: Reflections of an administrator's pathway into student affairs in the United States	53	Reflective practice
5.	Advocating for standards	50	
6.	Enhancing the professionalization of student affairs through assessment	48	
7.	Towards a professionalization of student affairs in Africa	41	Editorial
8.	Quality enhancement in student affairs and social justice: A reflective case study from South Africa	26	Reflective practice
9.	Professional mentoring in student affairs: Evaluation of a global programme	22	Reflective practice
10.	Competency development of southern African housing officers	18	
11.	Contextualising student affairs in Africa: The past, present and future	18	Editorial
12.	Making known the real: An exploration of academic advising practices in a South African higher education context	13	Research article
13.	Building South African women's leadership: A cohort model for the PhD in Student Affairs	11	
14.	Special guest IASAS edition: Issues and challenges in student affairs and services around the world	11	Guest editorial
15.	Conceptualisation and early implementation of an academic advising system at the University of Cape Town	11	Research
16.	Teaching and learning and the first-year experience: Interviews with Brenda Leibowitz and John Gardner	10	Interview and dialogue
17.	It's time to unite: A collaborative approach to addressing the needs of graduate students of colour	10	Research
18.	Peer leadership as an emerging high-impact practice: An exploratory study of the American experience	9	
19.	Learning communities for teaching practice school placements: A higher education initiative to promote equity for students with disabilities	9	Research article
20.	Residence heads as intentional role-players in promoting student success	9	Research article
21.	The challenges of student affairs at Kenyan public universities	8	Research article
22.	First-year college students' emotional intelligence and help-seeking behaviours as correlates of their academic achievement	8	Research article



**FIGURE 1** Sankey diagram illustrating the number of mentions by *JSAA* volume and issue.

the professionalization concepts. Does it try to frame an understanding in a particular manner? Second, we considered whether new conceptualizations were proposed that can contribute to the development of the discourse on SAS as a profession or beyond.

Out of the 22 papers, five explicitly deal with the conceptualization of one or more of the focus concepts, seven do not engage with the concepts at all, and the remaining 10 papers, while they do not deal explicitly with the conceptualizations of the terms, the content portrays a perspective on what these concepts must mean for SAS.

Among these five papers, the article published in *JSAA* 5(1) of 2017 by Li and Fang entitled “Professionalization of student affairs educators in China: History, challenges, and solutions,” for example, engages with the concept of professionalization. It framed an intervention from central university administrations and the Chinese government as important for the initial success of the professionalization of SAS in China. Next, the article “The role of research and scholarship in the professionalization of student affairs” by Carpenter and Haber-Curran directly conceptualizes what it means to be a professional and what professionalization entails. The paper discusses scholarly practice, the meaning of being a practitioner-scholar, and thus the concept of professionalism, emphasizing

the importance of professionally conducted, written, and vetted research and scholarship as the most essential components of professional development. Furthermore, they conceptualize scholarly practitioners as those who “practice their craft as autonomously as possible by making decisions primarily for the benefit of students, relying upon theory and research, remaining accountable to peers, providing professional feedback, acting ethically, and enacting the values of the profession generally” (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013, p. 8).

In the same issue, Selznick also engages with the concepts of professionalization and professionalism in “A proposed model for the continued professionalization of student affairs in Africa” article. Selznick argues that a model of professionalization that is sensitive to the three core dimensions of SAS work, that is, entering services, supporting services, and culminating services, as well as adaptable to the variety of contexts found within African higher education, could guide the development of the profession.

In the fourth article, Pansiri and Sinkamba (2017) argue for a professional approach to SAS that places emphasis on standards. The article “Advocating for Standards in Student Affairs Departments in African Institutions: University of Botswana experience” argues that professions must have set standards that guide their work. Furthermore, asserting that professional bodies with established, tried, and tested standards are critical to professional development in the field.

Finally, the article “Enhancing the professionalization of student affairs through assessment” by Gansemer-Topf published in 2013 argues that assessment is critical in legitimating SAS as a profession. It conceptualizes both profession and professional and argues that there are certain characteristics that provide insights into evolution of SAS from a practice to a profession. This aligns to earlier discussion of an evolutionary view of professionalization from one end of the spectrum of occupational practice to the other side which is a professionalized state.

Even those among the 22 articles that do not explicitly attempt to conceptualize the focal concepts make claims on what is deemed to be professional practice. Prominent are discussions of skills and competencies associated with SAS as a profession, considerations of processes or structures that contribute to professionalization, delineation of responsibilities in respect to other fields of practice, as well as arguments that highlight the boundary straddling position of the field and its practitioners. In other words, they establish and elaborate on a taxonomy of traits to define SAS as profession, SAS professionalism and the processes of professionalization required to get there.

In the main papers, we therefore find a tendency towards *uncritical* applications. Critical engagement with the established scholarly discourses on professions that underpin these key constructs is nearly absent. In the instances where SoP literature is reviewed and drawn on, for the most part the 22 JSAA articles draw on approaches that tend to be rejected by mainstream SoP literature to understand professions. A case in point is the widespread use of the so-called traditional trait approach, which basically establishes catalogs of traits and attributes that a particular profession ought to espouse. While there is heuristic advantage in such applications, it would be important for a journal that is committed to the development of the professionalization discourse to engage with the way this uncritical approach positions SAS scholarship on the professionalization of student affairs and the professionalism of its practitioners.

## High-level skills and knowledge as well as social justice

The ongoing, rapid massification of HE in the Global South has led to a diversification of university's student and staff bodies. In this process, SAS is challenged to ensure that



**TABLE 2** Code co-occurrence analysis.

Code	Total count	Co-occurrence with professionalization discourse	Co-occurrence coefficient
○ High level knowledge and skill	519	163	0.13
○ Social justice related	2359	148	0.05

widening participation and diversity does not exacerbate existing inequalities and/or generate new ones but ensure “equity and inclusion initiatives to address and redress longstanding practices of exclusion and privilege (typically along race, ethnicity, sex, gender and socio-economic class lines)” (Blessinger et al., 2020, p. 85). A SAS profession that does not explicitly acknowledge and involve a social justice mandate would be amiss. Our last concern is, therefore, a critical analysis of the already identified discourse on SAS as a profession in the *JSAA* in relation to social justice concerns.

This analysis required two additional rounds of coding. The first identified terms associated with the concepts of high-level skill and knowledge which, as established earlier, are historically considered important aspects of a profession. The related search terms and codes are: formal training, formal education, high-skills, university qualification, student development knowledge, student development theory, student learning theory, advising theory, specialized knowledge, and professional qualification. The second set of search terms associated loosely with social justice concerns include social justice, disadvantage, poor, inequality, equality, marginalized, access, race, black, “colored”, female, disability, and exclusion. The face validity of these terms was tested through discussion and adjustment between the authors.

Table 2 in the first column, gives an indication of the occurrence of the two codes generated by the search. Over the journal life cycle, there were a total of 2359 mentions of terms related to social justice. For the notion of high-level skills and knowledge, a much smaller number of mentions (519) leads us to assert that comparatively the social justice imperative forms a much larger driver of the general SAS discourse in the Global South. The analysis illustrates well-developed engagement with terms that relate to social justice.

In column two, when we consider code co-occurrence in a cross-tabulation of codes co-occurring in the same paragraph, it appears that the discourse of SAS as a profession engages more strongly the notions of high-level skills and knowledge (163) in support of its claims than those of social justice (148). This is significant when considered against the total number of extracts in the particular code. A total of 31.5% of all high-level knowledge and skills codes co-occurred with coding related to SAS as a profession, compared to only 6.3% of social justice related codes. Further analysis shows that discussions in the journal on social justice are mostly related to students and less to SAS as a profession.

In summary, we have shown that in keeping with its establishment rationale, the *JSAA* is engaging with and developing a discourse on SAS as a profession in Africa and the Global South more widely. However, closer analysis suggests that a more critical engagement may be required. Second, as much as the social justice discourse is well established in the journal, its intersection with the discourse of SAS as a profession is minimal. The social justice discourse focused more on students, while arguments on high-level knowledge and skills dominated the discourse of SAS as a profession.

Going forward, it might be useful to consider whether and how the journal would like to position its professionalization agenda in terms of current critique in the SoP literature, given its powerful role in developing the discourse on SAS as a profession in Africa and beyond.

## JSAA's role in developing the discourse on SAS as a profession: Possible avenues of inquiry to strengthen

Taking all the analyses together, we found the wider discourse strongly aligns with the notion of service to the student and governance that comes from the practitioners themselves, rather than a professionalism enforced *from the outside* to control practitioner behavior through more bureaucratic forms of discipline and standards. Although there is evidence of more managerialist influences that would be illustrative of the performance discourse and professionalism from outside (as in the case of the research article by Li and Fang mentioned above), this appears to form a much smaller focus of the discourse.

This insight is of relevance to further analytical and conceptual development given that this distinction on whether professionalism is driven from within or outside, is theorized as having implications for governance and perceptions of whether claims to being a profession is legitimate. This is also linked to a distinction in the literature between the effectiveness of professionalization projects as a form of governance or a facilitator of occupational change. The former would be associated with professionalism from outside, whereas the latter would be associated with professionalism from within. As Evetts (2013) also argues, while a big part of the control of the behavior of practitioners continues to be normative and ideological, “the balances vary between different occupational groups and are critically dependent on where the professionalism is constructed and enacted” (p. 790). Fournier (1999) and Evetts (2003) have thus highlighted that appeals to professionalism can be used by individuals outside of the field of practice to discipline work or workers, which is representative of other power dynamics and control, rather than a true reflection of internal professional intent. Although traditionally the sentiment was that *professionalism from within* is more legitimate, driven by core values, expert knowledge, and recognized skill with high levels of service to the “client,” there is increasing recognition that it is very likely to find a mixture of both types of professionalism and that professionalism from outside can be a catalyst for a positive professionalism.

This illustrates a useful area of debate for JSAA to engage in its quest to contribute to SAS as a profession in the Global South. The contradictory logics can be mediated by practitioners in different ways to foster greater autonomy and the exercise of their professional power that centers on the supremacy of the client. As Wilkesmann et al. (2020) have discussed the contradictory logics of medical professionalism and managerialism that practitioners navigate both at an organizational and individual level. Reflection on how this tension plays out within SAS could be instructive to this debate.

Finally, there are also opportunities for wider conceptual contribution. Our analysis of almost a decade of JSAA publications found that more recent contributions show a greater awareness of the conceptual debates and tensions surrounding research on these concepts that can actually contribute to the broader sociology of work and professions literature. The opportunities arise from weaknesses and critique of the SoP scholarship, which include a lack of a coherent internationally representative approach to the professionalization of a particular field of practice, and being euro-centric, not reflective of the distinct professionalization processes experienced in Africa. The SAS collection of scholarship has the potential to directly address these weaknesses.

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