Existentialist's Model of Professionalism

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Abstract

Existentialism is a twentieth century movement that involves itself with the problems and conditions that are in direct relation to man and the life that he lives. They take human being in the whole range of his existing not only as a thinking being but as an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. They think passionately as one who is involved in the actualities of existence. For this reason existentialists concentrate their attention on the problems that seem to be directly related to concrete human existence rather than on those that are abstract or speculative. Such themes as freedom, decision, human subjectivity, commitment, choice, responsibility are central in all the existentialists as these constitute the core of personal being.

Professionalism on other hand seems to involve the assumption that an individual may make a unique contribution within his field, may draw his 'entire self' into the decision-making process, in a sense may make himself 'indispensable' in his field. Professionalism requires competence in one's field, and a permanent commitment to performance in that field. The one who performs a significant activity in a spirit of commitment and dedication in one's field is a 'true professional'. The clarity of professional identity and the resolve of professional commitment are important in any organisation. Existentialism provides a preface to professionalism. The existential themes like freedom, decision, human subjectivity, commitment, communication, choice and responsibility co- opted by professionals is the core of professionalism.

This is a qualitative, descriptive paper. In this paper, the author takes the epistemic framework from existentialism and tries to use the existentialist's model on the concept of professionalism, which requires ethical codes like integrity, responsibility, fairness, tolerance, and empathy and how existential thinking effects the personal and professional behavior of professionals.

Key Words: Commitment, Communication, Existentialism, Freedom, Integrity, Professionalism

Introduction

Professionals are individuals who has a specialized knowledge in a particular field. The professional is an expert in his/her own specialized area of specialization. Professionalism on the other hand is the competence or skills expected in a professional. It is related to the activity, skills, or quality which is required for being a true professional. In this paper the authors discussed about what is the meaning of a true professional? What qualities are required for a true professional? And how existentialism helps in developing a true professional attitude in his profession?

The objective of the paper is to provide an epistemological framework to professionals based on existential model.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a twentieth century movement which involves itself with the problems and conditions that are in direct relation to man and the life that he lives. It is a way of thinking that begins with human existence. Existentialists refer the term existence not to an abstract essence, but to the concrete temporal way of being that distinguishes human beings from other beings. Human beings exist not merely in the sense that they are entities that we come across in the world. Human beings have a relationship to their existence, and their existence is understood in terms of possibility or the possible ways of being. They are the beings who give directions to their being, who are unfinished and always on the way. (Khan, 2012, p.11)

They are acting beings, agents, rather than merely rational or intellectual beings. Existentialism as it is always understood that it is an effort to think philosophically from the point of view of the actor rather than the spectator. They concern himself with those problems which are vital to him as a human being. Philosophy for them is not a merely an abstract or an intellectual exercise which ignores the personal involvement of the thinker, but it is a reflection upon our relations with persons and things in our effort to give shape to our way of being-in-the-world.

Existentialism is a revolt against the reductionist approach of philosophers who defines human being in the form of a particular essence. Existentialists take human being in the whole range of his existing – not only as a thinking being but as an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. They think passionately as one who is involved in the actualities of existence. One cannot posit a 'nature' or an 'essence' of man and then go on to make deductions about him. As Sartre puts it in *Existentialism and Humanism* that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterward." (Sartre, 1948, p.28)

For this reason existentialists concentrate their attention on the problems that seem to be directly related to concrete human existence rather than on those that are abstract or speculative. Such themes as freedom, decision, human subjectivity, commitment, choice, responsibility are central in all the existentialists, as these constitute the core of personal being.

Professionalism

Professionals and professionalism required a range of qualities permeated with symbolic meaning. Professionals and professionalism equates with the notions of knowledge, identity, power, status, respectability, altruism, service, and a high quality of work ethics. The two terms are invariably defined in terms of one another to such an extent that studies on the subject often do not differentiate between the two. However, in reality both are conceptually different. Profession is usually defined in terms of formal characteristics, while professionalism may encompass a broader set of criteria focusing on the behavioural nature of being professional or acting professionally. As Martyn Pearl (1997) makes a useful distinction between the greater formality of Professional, i.e. relating to a professional body, and the intuitive nature of professional, i.e. personal behaviour.

Professionals shows 'the acquisition of specialist knowledge through education and training, adherence to professional and personal codes of conduct, a greater or lesser degree of autonomy in their working lives, and loyalty primarily to the profession, rather than the organisation' (adapted from Elcock and Rose, 1993, cited in Pearl, 1997).

This focus draws attention to the importance of professionalism at the level of the individual, and the working practices that ensue from interpretations of what it meant to be a professional. The sociological literature on professions has largely treated the values associated with professionalism - altruism, personal detachment, public service, as part of the rhetoric by which professionalizing groups support their claims to power and status. But 'emerging' perspectives view professionalism as a set of workplace practices, as a way of interacting with clients, where boundaries have been redefined in response to economic and cultural pressures (Malin, 2000)

The existing sociological work on professions and professionalism takes a structural approach (Macdonald 1995); the focus is on how groups of people professionalise or how professionalism can be defined, which occupations count as 'true' professions (Johnson 1981).

There are some common themes pertinent to professionalism and boundary making, including the importance of personal experience and empathy; maintaining a separate personal life; working in non-traditional workplaces; the nature of professional qualifications; and the management of relationships with stakeholders. These qualities of professionalism are not given by birth but it can

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be learned through reflexive practice and with different epistemic model. As, in the trait approach, professionalisation was seen as a process by which occupations attempted to become professions by progressively acquiring these necessary characteristics. An emphasis on knowledge as a 'core generating trait' of professionalism provides the starting point for … the professions (MacDonald, 1995).

As in sociological studies, 'Sociologists generally take a model of rational, formalised scientific knowledge as their starting point in the study of the epistemological base of the professions and then elaborate in relation to a number of other features of professions and their social context'(MacDonald, 1995: 157). We have taken the existentialist model to induce a true professional attitude among them.

Existentialist's Model of Professionalism: Existentialism by providing an epistemic model present a holistic understanding of professional competence. It explains how central aspects of practice such as integrity, responsibility, empathy, fairness and tolerance are important at a specific professional competence in work performance. Therefore, an existential ontological perspective is proposed as offering a more comprehensive and integrative analysis of professional competence. The competencies required for professionals are:

Integrity: Integrity is very important desired trait for being professional. A true professional must be a person of integrity. It means a professional's thought and action should be integrated. There should not be any difference between his thought and action. He should translate his thought into practice. Translating thoughts into actions requires a professional to show courage in accepting the consequences of his actions and be fair and honest in his practices. As Jaspers says:

"Philosophical thought is practical activity… not impartial thinking which studies a subject with indifference" (Cited in Gill, 1973, p. 15). Similarly, Kierkegaard highlights this further by drawing a contrast between the lives as lived by Socrates and that of Plato. He writes:

"Socrates… concentrates essentially upon accentuating existence, while Plato forgets this, and loses himself in speculation." (Cited in Gill, 1973, p. 15). Nietzsche too, much in keeping with Kierkegaard's viewpoint makes a similar distinction between what he calls as the theoretical man and the tragic mind. According to him, a philosopher should be an instance for the society at large and it should be not by mere thoughts but mainly through his actions. He declares, "I judge a philosopher by whether he can serve as an example." (Cited in Gill, 1973, p. 15) Sartre, too, believes that a man

should be 'engaged'. He thinks that in order to become authentic, a man should be actively involved in the actualities of life.

Thus, a professional should have a clear sense of values and beliefs that strengthen the creative decisions that he makes. He should lead the organization with an example. His action should show courage, have fairness and be honest.

Responsibility: Professional's integrity is not completed without responsibility and responsibility lies in the fact that whenever we choose something it should concern all others. We are not choosing only for ourselves but for entire humanity. Sartre says:

"If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (Sartre, 1948, p.18).

A true professional should take responsibility of his actions and decisions. He should not blame others for the outcomes of his decisions. Being responsible is not to indulge in conflict of interest and his decisions should not lead to personal gain. Rather, it should be for all. In addition, whatever the decision or action he takes: good or bad, he should take the responsibility for its consequences.

Empathy: A decision or an action should be coupled with sensitivity; "Able to feel for others". Thus, a true professional exists by being sensitive to the feelings of others or being empathetic. A professional shows "Empathy", which means being sensitive to the needs of others and show concerns for others. Sartre says in Existentialism and Humanism that we are not choosing only for ourselves but for entire humanity. Therefore, when a professional takes any decision he must think that he has a responsibility for everyone. He should have an I- Thou type of relationship with others not an I- It type of relationship.

Fairness and Tolerance: I-Thou type of relationship connects a true professional to the traits of "Fairness and Tolerance". When a professional have feelings for the needs of others, takes responsibility for his actions then the professional embed himself with the traits of fairness and tolerance. Fairness for true professional is defined as to treat all with equity as well as equality. Equity

is, when behaviour, actions and decisions are based on "worth and gain". On the other hand, equality is based on impartial considerations.

Taking responsibility and showing the concerns for others need. It gives rise to the quality of, understanding others; understanding believes of others; understanding the thoughts of other. Thus, evolving all this to the quality of "Tolerance". As existentialist believes that, every human being is unique in himself. We cannot define a human objectively. The acceptance of this uniqueness of human being is the foundation of tolerance. As Sartre says

"Every truth and every action imply….a human subjectivity". (Sartre, 1948, p. 24) He believes that "there is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity". He gives his famous formula "existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer… subjectivity must be the starting point." (Sartre, 1948, p. 55) Therefore, a professional in contemporary world exists and achieves its true being by showing tolerance.

Conclusion: Thus from the above discussion we can conclude that professionals can take theoretical help form existential philosophy. The understanding of existential philosophy will make them understand that our life is our project and a professional should take his/her work as their project of life. Therefore, whatever the work they will do, they will do it with integrity, freedom, responsibility, commitment, empathy, and over all they will take full responsibility for their decision.

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