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5

6 **Fragmented fields: professionalisms and work settings in Italian management**
7 **consultancy.**

8

9 *Abstract*

10 Management consultancy has long been a contested terrain in the sociology of the professions.
11 Although the professionalism of management consultants has always been emphasised by
12 practitioners themselves, the lack of a strong community of peers has been an impediment to
13 their professionalisation. In this article, I argue that professionalism is not the outcome of a
14 process of regulation and institutionalization, but that it has to be conceived a discourse
15 comprising norms, worldviews and values that define what is appropriate for an individual to
16 be considered a competent and recognised member of this community. Given the diversity
17 characterising the field, there are multiple discourses surrounding professionalism of
18 management consultants, and these discourses are shaped by work settings. Work settings are
19 a combination of the type of organization (professional partnership or professional service firm)
20 and the employment status (employee or self-employed). Drawing on the empirical evidence
21 from various work settings (professional service firms, professional partnership and self-
22 employment), I investigate four clusters of practitioners identified in 55 biographical and semi-
23 structured interviews conducted with management consultants in Italy. Four types of
24 professionalism emerge from the clusters. Organizing professionalism is the sole
25 professionalism which appears in all work settings. Other discourses (corporate,
26 commercialised and hybrid professionalism) are context-dependent and more likely to be found
27 in specific work settings.

28

1 **Fragmented fields: professionalisms and work settings in Italian management**
2 **consultancy.**

3
4 The expansion of ‘new’ management occupations calls for a theoretical reformulation of the
5 professionalism concept. Historically, managerialism and professionalism have always been
6 seen as separate logics, but recent empirical evidence shows that specific forms of
7 professionalism are developing from a fruitful hybridization (Noordegraaf, 2007 and 2015;
8 Butler and Collins, 2016; Heusinkveld et al, 2018). Management consultancy is at the heart of
9 this change, due to its ambiguous role between management and the professions (Butler and
10 Collins, 2016; Collins and Butler, 2019).

11 However, management consultancy has commonly been considered a lesser professional
12 activity than traditional professions (Reed, 1996; Kieser and Groß, 2006; Fincham, 2006; Clark
13 and Kipping, 2012). But, is professionalism a quantifiable phenomenon? The impression of
14 ‘lesser’ professionalism can be imputed to the application of models of professionalization
15 derived from collegial professions, such as medicine or law (Butler and Collins, 2016; Collins
16 and Butler, 2019). Such analyses have been criticised for their lack of theoretical dynamism
17 and an inability to account for the development of ‘new’ management occupations (Watson,
18 2002; Adamson et al, 2015; Heusinkveld et al, 2018). In simple terms, ‘new’ management
19 occupation scholars argue that collegial models of professionalization are not suitable for
20 understanding the nature of management consultancy (Heusinkveld et al, 2018). Professions
21 like management consulting have a knowledge/skill base which is organization-specific; they
22 are forced to rely on a task repertoire that is fragmented, diverse and contextual-dependent
23 (Reed, 1996).

24 Following this argument, I assume that professionalism is neither the outcome of a process of
25 regulation nor a collegial stance, but relates to “*how practitioners explain their work* (Cohen et
26 al, 2005: 776)”, aligning with the discursive tradition in the study of professions (Fournier,
27 1999; Evetts, 2013; Olakivi and Niska, 2016). Professionalism is a discourse comprising norms,
28 worldviews and values that define what is appropriate in a certain occupational group in order
29 for an individual to be considered a competent and recognised member of this community.
30 According to Watson (2002), Kitay and Wright (2007) and Olakivi and Niska (2016),
31 discourses are sets of interconnected concepts, expressions and statements that give sense to
32 *professional* and *organizational* phenomena. Discourses are meaning-making resources
33 (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Kipping, 2011; Olakivi and Niska, 2016) that shape
34 professional socialization (Anteby et al, 2016), and they are deeply embedded in socio-
35 economic, political, cultural, and organizational contexts (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Suddaby et al,
36 2009). Choosing this definition of professionalism implies looking at “*the ways in which a*
37 *combination of occupational values and broader discursive issues act within organizational*
38 *fields to shape day-to-day working relationships and broader obligations* (Collins and Butler,
39 2019: 4). A discursive concept of professionalism can be usefully applied to all those
40 occupations that do not fit the collegial model of professionalization, in order to investigate to
41 what extent and how their practitioners lay claim to and enact professionalism. But it is also
42 very effective to observe their political stance: members of occupational groups use discourses
43 as rhetorical devices and ideological resources to further their interest and to give legitimacy to
44 their claims over material and symbolic resources in society (Watson, 2002; Collins and Butler,
45 2019). In Alvesson and Johansson (2002: 229), professionalism is “*a resource on which*
46 *management consultants can draw selectively upon in their claims for authority, status and*
47 *credibility*”.

1 A second point to be made is that relatively little consideration has been given to the extent to
2 which different work settings impact on professionalism. In this paper, work setting refers to
3 the combination of type of organization in which the professionals perform their work and their
4 employment status (see Table A3). I argue that the diversity of work settings within which
5 management consultancy is performed and the lack of a unique and strong actor capable of
6 imposing a dominant discourse on “*how to be professional*”, fragment professionalism in this
7 field. As noted by Kitay and Wright (2007) and Kipping (2011), heterogeneity and conflicting
8 identities are more likely in professions like management consultancy, which is characterised
9 by an inability to establish a traditional professionalization (Collins and Butler, 2019), by a
10 broad range of specialties and organizations (Kitay and Wright, 2007), and by the role played
11 by corporations in undermining attempts to professionalization (Muzio et al, 2011). In fact,
12 given the lack of a strong professional association that would be able to define what is
13 professional and what is not in the field, the importance of employment status and organizations
14 are greater than for collegial professions, regarding the definition of professionalism. I argue
15 that fragmentation in professionalism experienced in management consultancy might be better
16 explained by the multiplicity of work settings than by weak professional commitment.

17 In this paper I demonstrate that the lack of a strong community of peers agreeing on a dominant
18 professionalism that is accepted and endorsed by practitioners rather it changes the sources of
19 professionalism, meaning that work settings become the locus for generating professionalism.
20 Any organization might constitute a professional community to substitute for the lack of a
21 dominant actor; the employment status mediates the relationship between practitioner and
22 organizations. This results in a multiplicity of professionalisms, as varied as the work settings
23 in which consultancy is provided. This multiplicity is open to hybridity in professionalism, not
24 to its absence (Butler and Collins, 2016). Hence, if scholars reframe professionalism more
25 dynamically, discourses about ‘*being professional*’ can be plural and equally legitimate.

26 Starting from these considerations, I argue that the nature, extent and variety of professionalism
27 in management consultancy might remain largely unknown if the diversity of the management
28 consultancy work setting is not considered. The concept of work setting is operationalized as
29 the type of organization (professional partnerships PPs vs. professional service firms PSFs¹)
30 and employment status (dependent vs. self-employed workers²). Thus, I investigate discourses
31 on the professionalism of management consultants as they become embedded in diverse work
32 settings. To explore these dynamics, the following research questions are posed: what are the
33 main discourses through which management consultants claim to be professional? Are
34 discourses on professionalism influenced by the type of organization and/or practitioners’
35 employment status?

36 Although several authors have stressed the intrinsic limitation of conceiving of professionalism
37 as monolithic and unitary (Hanlon, 1996; Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2007;
38 Noordegraaf *et al.*, 2014; Butler and Collins, 2016), empirical evidence on the role of work
39 settings in determining multiple professionalisms in management consulting has been limited,
40 as research has focused largely on employees in professional service firms (for example Grey,

¹ In the context of this paper, I assume corporations to be represented by the model of professional service firms, although several scholars have proposed to further distinguishing them by using the model of Managed Professional Business (MPB) or the Reconstructed Professional Firm (RPF). These concepts mostly differ from PSF in terms of corporate governance (Greenwood and Empson, 2003), an aspect which has not been investigated in the present project – although fiercely debated in the literature (Brock, 2006; Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2007; Scott, 2008; Muzio et al, 2011; Clark and Kipping, 2012).

² With the term employment status, I refer to the contract that the practitioners have: employee or self-employed professional. Situations may be the more varied in my sample, as management consultants might be employees of a consulting company or collaborating with freelance under exclusive license. They might be partners in a professional partnership, but at the same time they are their freelance supplier. Table A3 in the appendix clarifies the point.

1 1998; Kipping, 2011; Muzio et al., 2011; Fincham, 2012; Heusinkveld et al, 2018). This has
2 resulted in a lack of evidence from other work settings, such as small and medium-sized
3 companies or self-employment (for notable exceptions, see Kitay and Wright, 2007; Furusten,
4 2013; Maestriperieri, 2016; Maestriperieri and Cucca, 2018; Cross and Swart, 2018).

5 This article aims to fill this gap in the current debate, drawing on data collected in 55
6 biographical and semi-structured interviews with management consultants in Italy and working
7 in professional service firms, in professional partnership and self-employed. The resulting
8 typology presents four different clusters of '*being professional*' which map professionalism in
9 Italian management consultancy: 'yuppie', the 'unwilling' consultant, the 'self'-employed, the
10 'professional' consultant. These clusters emerged inductively by applying positioning (Davies
11 and Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 1997; Kohler Riessman, 2008) and biographical analysis techniques
12 (Bichi, 2002; Olagnero and Saraceno, 1993). The results were interpreted using the analytical
13 framework of career transitions, focusing on three distinct elements: the type of organization in
14 which management consultants provide their consultancy (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012), the
15 transition between multiple employment statuses (McLean *et al.*, 2012), and dominant career
16 orientation (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2013).

17 The paper starts with the review of relevant literature, particularly focusing on professionalism
18 diversity as it emerged in previous studies. Following the methods section where I describe the
19 the biographical and narrative approach used in the analysis, I discuss my results. I conclude
20 the article by discussing my findings in the context of existing literature pointing out the role
21 of work setting in determining which type of professionalism each cluster claims.

23 **Multiple professionalisms and variety of work settings in management consultancy**

24 The literature is currently assessing the declining centrality of the 'collegial' model of
25 professionalism, theorised as a regulatory institution defined by peer control (Freidson 2001).
26 New theoretical perspectives have progressively examined the penetration of organisational
27 logics in professionalism (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2007) and organizations are now
28 conceived as the primary location of and vehicle for professional action (Muzio et al, 2013).
29 The resulting hybridisation (Noordegraaf 2007; 2015) has led to a rise in new concepts like
30 commercialised professionalism (Hanlon 1996; 1998) or corporate professionalism (Muzio et
31 al, 2011), stressing the increasing role of organizations as a source of professional regulation.
32 The reinterpretation of professionalism by the organisations in which professionals provide
33 their services weakens the heuristic capacity of collegial professionalism as an analytical tool
34 (Watson, 2002). Authors contrast highly-regulated collegial professions with fragmented forms
35 of professionalism, characterising "*weakly regulated fields with little agreement on methods*
36 *and norms* (Noordegraaf et al, 2014: 22)" as 'new' management occupations (Heusinkveld et
37 al, 2018).

38 Fragmentation is found in fields with heterogenous work practices and diversity in the
39 organizational context in which the professional practice is provided. Management consultancy
40 is a field characterised by heterogenous work practices, weak regulation and high differentiation
41 in work settings (Kitay and Wright, 2007; Kipping, 2011; Collins and Butler, 2019). In the past,
42 authors have discussed the source of this heterogeneity (see Alvesson and Johansson, 2002 for
43 a review). Identified sources were usually the nature of consultancy work, the types of client,
44 and the management consultants' position within the hierarchy of consultancy companies. The
45 various typologies have focused on how the activity of consultancy was practised. But, seldom
46 is heterogeneity a concept related to employment status or to the type of organizations within
47 which they practice.

1 In fact, the variety of professionalism in relation to the organizational fields has been already
2 acknowledged by previous studies, when focusing on the attempts of large professional service
3 firms (PSF) to institutionalize their own models of professionalism (Muzio et al, 2013). For
4 instance, Kipping (2011) reconstructed the history of management consultancy by considering
5 discourses on professionalism as a resource mobilised by consulting companies from the early
6 21st century up to the present. He identifies three main waves in the evolution of management
7 consultancy firms: “scientific management” (1900-1970), in which professionalism was
8 derived from a close association with existing and similar professions like engineering;
9 “strategy and structure” (1940-1990), in which professionalism emulates the legal profession
10 and “information and communication” (1960 – today), in which professionalism has become a
11 purely linguistic notion, arguing in terms of authority, status and credibility (Kipping, 2011).
12 However, the distinction drawn between different perceptions of professionalism is limited by
13 a focus on PSFs in the Anglo-Saxon market, with heterogeneity emerging only when
14 confronting this same group and its evolving specialties over time.

15 Analysing the longitudinal development of management consultants’ professional association
16 in the UK, Butler and Collins (2016) argue that consultants have pursued various modes of
17 professionalism, located between collegial and corporate professionalism. Instead of focusing
18 on their weak or incomplete process of professionalization, they focus on the conditions that
19 make impossible for management consultants associations to pursue a collegial
20 professionalization, namely the unwillingness of large firms to cede control on cognitive and
21 normative mechanism to the institute. They argue that a hybrid professionalism emerged from
22 this situation; professionalism is located within organizational practices (Butler and Collins,
23 2016).

24 But, since much of the research focuses on PSFs (e.g. Alvesson, 2006; Faulconbridge and
25 Muzio *et al.*, 2011; Sturdy, 2011; Kipping and Clark, 2012), they seem to be treated as the sole
26 *locus* in which management consultants operate, underestimating other work settings (Cross
27 and Swart, 2018). However, there are several notable exceptions in the literature that do take
28 into account different work settings and their impact on professionalism, showing how they are
29 an important element in defining the professionalism of management consultancy. Furusten
30 (2013) focused on small and medium-sized companies in the context of management
31 consultancy. His results show that the role of organizations in defining professionalism is
32 weaker than in larger organizations, while market logic is more important. A recent study by
33 Maestripieri (2016) on those practising as independent professionals stresses the role of
34 personal networks, on-the-job training, and market success in defining management
35 consultants’ professionalism, instead of intermediate bodies as professional associations. Cross
36 and Swart’s study (2018) showed that rather than seeking the institutionalization of their
37 professional position, freelance consultants in UK take advantage of ambiguity in professional
38 identity. Credibility and acknowledgement do not stem from a strong identification with a
39 profession, but rather from their marketability. Hence, the three studies cited above emphasise
40 that the commercial logic dominates the professional discourse in management consultancy,
41 when other work setting than PSFs are taken in account.

42 Although not rooted in the mainstream debate on professionalism, Kitay and Wright’s (2007)
43 study is relevant, being one of only a few to take varying employment status into account in
44 studying management consultancy. The authors reconstruct what they call the ‘rhetorics of
45 management consultants’, as an outcome of the discursive process involving fitting meaning
46 into a work setting. They identified five meaningful discourses associated with management
47 consultancy; observing that variation between them arises from authors’ specific empirical
48 approaches, which are not limited to gathering data from those employed in large corporations.
49 Their participants ranged from PSF employees to self-employed professionals. The rhetoric of

1 the “Professional” was recognised as the closest to ideal-typical professionalism, and is the
2 most diffuse among all types of respondents, with almost half recognising it. Other rhetorics
3 such as “Prophet”, “Partner”, “Business Person” and “Service Worker” are context-dependent,
4 and consultants use them depending on the specific structure and/or scale of the consultancy
5 company or its specialty (business strategy, information technology, human resources and
6 operational efficiency) (Kitay and Wright, 2007).

7 In line with Kitay and Wright (2007), Sudabby et al’s (2009) study on accountants shows that
8 work setting does matter when defining the values associated with a profession. Their analysis
9 demonstrates the possible co-presence of values inspired by the logic of ideal-typical
10 professionalism and managerialism in professional partnerships. This study shows that working
11 in a PP does not imply higher support for ideal-typical professionalism’s values. By contrast,
12 among those who work in Professional partnership, there is strong commitment to the
13 organization itself and a growing importance of commercial logics, with no apparent conflict
14 between commitment to professions and commitment to organization. They also argue that the
15 fragmentation of values is best understood by looking at the work settings. Those who work in
16 PSF clearly distinguish themselves from the accountants of other firms regarding their attitudes
17 to professional institutions and ideology, showing lower levels of affiliation to the profession.
18 Notably, Suddaby’s study does not take into account self-employed professionals.

19 The review of the previous study shows that work settings are increasingly important in shaping
20 attitudes, norms, and opinions among professionals and that fragmentation is likely to emerge
21 from work-setting diversity.

22 23 **Research questions and methodology**

24 The study investigates the role that the type of organization (professional partnership or
25 professional service firm) and the employment status (employee or self-employed) play in
26 defining management consultants’ professionalism, extending the analysis to professionals
27 working in small companies and freelance. It uses research design inspired by Kitay and Wright
28 (2007), based on analytic induction (Morse and Mitcham, 2002). I went to the field with the
29 aim of exploring professionalism, conceptualised as discourses, prescriptions, norms and
30 practices associated with performing management consultancy in a “professional way”. The
31 outcome of the study, shown in Table 2, is an inductive-based typology that categorises the
32 discourses that emerged in the interviews.

33 The analysis is based on data collected from 55 biographical and semi-structured interviews.
34 Interviews were conducted with a sample of management consultants in Italy during 2009/2010
35 as part of the author’s PhD thesis (Maestriperi, 2013). Italy is of particular interest in the field
36 of MC research, because the labour structure of Italian management consultancy is unique in a
37 comparative perspective, due to its simultaneous fragmentation and concentration (FEACO,
38 2018). Approximately 85% of all businesses (16,000 organizations) have fewer than three
39 employees, while just 35 firms with over 50 employees control more than 50% of the market
40 (Assoconsult, 2015). Previous estimates, based on the Italian labour force survey (Maestriperi,
41 2013), suggest the total population of Italian management consultants is approximately 45,000
42 workers (including freelancers and employees), of which the author estimates that less than 3
43 in 10 consultants are employed by PSFs (own elaboration on Assoconsult, 2015). The relatively
44 large role played by microbusinesses, i.e. controlling approximately one quarter of the market,
45 arises from the fact that the structure of the Italian manufacturing system is still based on a
46 primarily family-owned model of micro-companies. This means that the Italian market is
47 characterised by the small dimensions of buyers (Colli, 2010), which has consequently impeded

1 the growth of consultancy firms and increased the diversity of the field (see the data presented
2 in Table 1 in appendix).

3 The Italian case thus represents an ideal situation for researching the diversity characterising
4 management consulting market. The sampling design aimed at representing the organizational
5 variety of the Italian consultancy market using a purposive approach (Creswell, 2002). The 55
6 interviewees are distributed as follows: freelance consultants (25 interviewees), practitioners in
7 small to medium-sized enterprises (20 interviewees) and consultants in professional service
8 firms with over 50 employees (10 interviewees)³. Sampling terminated when I felt that the
9 critical point of saturation had been reached (Saunders et al, 2018), so that additional interviews
10 would not have added new information. Selecting participants for the study was not
11 straightforward. Management consultancy in Italy is an unregulated profession, implying that
12 there are no legal obligations for management consultants to participate in a professional
13 association, to observe professional standards, or to obtain any certification or specific degree
14 in order to provide professional services. Moreover, the professional associations do not help
15 to delineate who warrants professional status. There are two associations, the APCO for self-
16 employed people and microenterprises, and ASSOCONSULT representing larger companies.
17 However, neither represents the majority of Italian practitioners (Crucini, 1999; Author, 2013).

18 Defining boundaries in management consultancy is not easy either (Kitay and Wright, 2007);
19 professionals with very different educational backgrounds and specialties can claim to be
20 consultants. The selection criterion for identifying respondents was thus very pragmatic;
21 professionals were included in the study if they presented themselves as management
22 consultants, in line with Kitay and Wright (2007). This assumption yielded a sample that varies
23 in terms of specialties and employment status, ranging from self-employed psychologists
24 specialising in organizational climate to corporate strategy consultants in IT services. However,
25 the majority of the interviewees have economic or engineering backgrounds (two interviewees
26 have only a secondary school certificate as their highest qualification, while the remainder have
27 completed tertiary level education with varying specialisations). The variation in sector and
28 background is accounted for in the analysis that follows (see appendix, Table A2).

29 I selected the interviewees by employing a number of sampling strategies. Three SMEs were
30 involved in the research project in the first phase, and their employees/collaborators were all
31 included in the analysis (Group 1). Freelance professionals and owners of small firms (Group
32 2) were selected from a list provided by the professional association APCO, and via snowball
33 sampling conducted after the initial interviews. The final group (Group 3), comprised corporate
34 professionals who had been identified by interviewees from groups 1 and 2 using snowball
35 sampling. A semi-structured interview template was developed from the analysis of group 1's
36 biographical interviews, conducted prior to the group 2 and group 3 interviews. The group 2
37 semi-structured interviews also formed part of a concomitant project on professional self-
38 employment (Ranci, 2012). Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table
39 A2.

40 The research design was sequential, combining two qualitative techniques of data collection.
41 The initial stage entailed biographical interviews to map the concepts associated with
42 management consultancy and the events that lead the person to become a consultant. The
43 biographical interviews (Bichi, 2002) afforded the interviewees in group 1 considerable
44 freedom when responding, as the participants were asked only one starting question: "*Tell me
45 about your job, starting wherever you like*". Prompts (Leech, 2002) then investigated career
46 progression aims and aspirations, discourses associated with professionalism, the ways in

³ For a complete overview of work settings of the interviewees, see Table A3 in the appendix. For further reference to work settings, the extracts of the interviews presented in the results are identified using the groups presented in Table A3.

1 which professional activities were performed, and the role of the type of organization. The
2 second stage involved semi-structured interviews (group 2 and 3) to test the hypothesis based
3 on the empirical evidence from the first set of interviews concerning the roles of organizations
4 and employment status, as experienced by practitioners in different work settings. The structure
5 and content of the semi-structured interviews was the same for all interviewees (Bichi, 2002);
6 they started with a reconstruction of the person's career and its main events, and focused mainly
7 on investigating the dimensions the interviewees associated with professionalism. Biographical
8 insights were fundamental to reconstructing the relevant transitions between work settings that
9 informed the typology of Table 2 and Figure 1.

10 The interviews were transcribed in full for the biographical ones (group 1), and transcribed
11 using a predisposed template in the case of the semi-structured interviews (groups 2 and 3). The
12 template reported the responses to questions from the semi-structured interviews, providing a
13 summary by the author to highlight the content of interviewee answers, and including long
14 quotations from interviewee. All interviews were transcribed and analysed by myself.
15 Consistent with previous studies based on a discursive approach to professionalism (e.g. Cohen,
16 2005; Carollo and Solari, 2019), coding was intended to highlight beliefs, values, prescriptions,
17 and all the arguments used by interviewees to claim their professional status, that I considered
18 associated with professionalism.

19 The resulting texts were analysed using Atlas-Ti version 6, and clusters were developed
20 inductively to group each participant on the basis of the similarity of their biographies. To
21 develop the clusters, an analytical framework based on career transitions was applied to
22 biographies through two techniques: positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 1997) and
23 biographical trajectories (Olagnero and Saraceno, 1993). The first technique focuses on the set
24 of references a person uses during an interview, and the second on the identification,
25 emergence, and comprehension of key transitions and critical turning points in their narrative.
26 Using positioning, the empirical data was organized according to the career orientations that
27 emerged for each interviewee (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2013). These were identified by establishing
28 the principal figurative stance to which the interviewees benchmarked their career. The two key
29 positions considered were manager and professional, which were assumed to represent the
30 individual's career goal. Using biographical trajectories, the key events and transitions in the
31 management consultants' careers regarding work (for example hiring, layoffs, and self-
32 employment activities), education (degrees or special training courses completed), and
33 historical contexts (for example the financial crisis) were identified. The outcomes of this
34 analysis were two emerging poles: remaining in consultancy, whereby an individual seeks to
35 pursue a career as a consultant in the medium-long term, and moving from consultancy,
36 whereby being a management consultant is regarded as a transitory situation. Therefore, the
37 four clusters are based on a combination of the two dimensions: orientation
38 (manager/professional) and trajectory (remain in/move from consultancy) (Table 1)⁴. After the
39 interviewees had been divided according to these two dimensions, responses detailing what it
40 meant to them to be professional among the various clusters, were analysed (Table 1).

41 For the purposes of this study, a 'career' is defined as an unfolding sequence of macro role
42 transitions, involving movements between organizations, employment statuses, or professional
43 roles held by workers along their biographies (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Ibarra and Burbulescu, 2010;
44 Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). A career has three important dimensions: first, it develops over
45 time; second, it has a direction of progress, either upward, lateral, or downward; third, it occurs
46 in specific locations, identified in this case by the organizations in which the management

⁴ Two of the interviewees could not be categorised: the two women were employed in a professional partnership in junior roles as self-employed collaborators with limited experience in the role, and showed no intention of pursuing consulting in the future. They were economically dependent on a sole buyer, and with a limited involvement in commercial activities.

1 consultants work (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). The analytical framework of career
 2 transitions encompasses several dimensions that are fundamental to how people present their
 3 professional discourse and its relationship to work settings. The resultant analytical outcome
 4 has a biographical nature, based on a sequence of transitions and roles over time. It is also
 5 contextual, because career orientations are defined by “*relatively stable career preferences*
 6 *shaped by the interplay between individual identity, family and social background, work*
 7 *experiences and labour market conditions*” (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2013: 150). In the results section,
 8 all these elements are analysed for each of the four clusters mentioned above, to show emerging
 9 correlations within each cluster’s professionalism. The results are presented graphically in
 10 Figure 1.

11 The typology of professionalisms emerged inductively from the analysis of interviews: the
 12 analysis aimed to link the discourses of each cluster in table 1 with previous theoretical
 13 interpretations of professionalism. Discourses revealed consistencies and similarities within
 14 each cluster and work setting (type of organization and employment status) were the main
 15 explicative dimensions that accounted for differences between professionalisms. The outcome
 16 of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

17

18 **The findings**

19 This section presents the four clusters of management consultants identified during the analysis
 20 (Table 1), and categorises their various ideas about ‘being professional’ in the type of
 21 organization within which they are active, using an analytical framework focusing on
 22 transitions between work settings and career orientation (see Figure 1). The four clusters form
 23 a typology of professionalisms (see Table 2), embedded in different work settings (Table A3).
 24 The interviewees are categorised according to their own narrative and biographical accounts of
 25 their careers as management consultants, as explained in the previous section.

26

27 **Table 1 – The matrix of management consultancy clusters**

	REMAINING in consultancy	MOVING from consultancy
Positioning as PROFESSIONALS	The ‘professional’ consultant	The ‘self’-employed
Positioning as MANAGERS	The ‘unwilling’ consultant	The ‘yuppie’

28

29 **Management consultants as Managers: the ‘Yuppie’ and the ‘Unwilling’**

30 The narratives of the first two clusters are positioned on management. For the management
 31 consultants belonging to these two groups (the ‘yuppie’ and the ‘unwilling’ consultant), being
 32 a consultant marks a discontinuity within a career in which attaining a managerial position is
 33 the final goal. These two groups distinguish themselves in terms of how they are positioned
 34 relative to managers. In the first case, a postalgic attitude (Ybema, 2004) is evident, longing for
 35 a better future in which the interviewee would assume a managerial position, thereby justifying
 36 current undesirable working conditions and limited autonomy (Stenger, 2017). In the second, a
 37 nostalgic longing for ‘bygone days’ characterises consultants whose careers as managers have
 38 been unwillingly interrupted (Ybema, 2004).

39

1 **‘Yuppie’**

2 *«In general, the consultant is in a fast lane, in the sense that you have the chance*
3 *at 25 years old, newly graduated, to work with people... with professionals [...]*
4 *Then, as a consequence of the awareness of being in this fast lane, you necessarily*
5 *become more ambitious, because you work twice as hard as the others and then, as*
6 *a consequence, you tell yourself “come on, if I work twice as hard as the others I*
7 *can build a career in half the time” ...and this makes you very ambitious»*

8 [Corrado, 31, SME employee]

9 ‘Yuppie’ is an acronym of ‘Young Urban Professional’, which became popular in the 1980s to
10 identify young men and women aged between 25–35 who pursued self-realisation by accessing
11 financial and managerial elites. This term ideally represents the first cluster of interviewees, as
12 they are “*aggressive, competitive, hardworking, and youthful*” (Grey, 1998: 580). In the current
13 meritocratic system, people acquire prestige and status by competing with each other (Gill,
14 2015); employment in a highly selective and elitist consultancy corporation is an effective
15 strategy to obtain high social and economic rewards without strong professional or
16 organizational affiliation (Anteby et al, 2016). The 12 interviewees grouped in this cluster (three
17 of whom are female) are educated at top-level universities and MBA schools and hold
18 managerial degrees (economics or process engineering). They are also the youngest (29 years
19 old, on average) (see table A1 in appendix). Ambitions for a managerial career drive their
20 engagement in management consultancy.

21 According to Maister, “*people do not join professional firms for jobs, but for careers*” (1993,
22 cited in: Alvehus and Spicer, 2012: 502). Correspondingly, the management consultants within
23 this cluster are focused on transition, generally viewing their consultancy activities as a
24 temporary and instrumental stage, before attaining an executive position, for example becoming
25 partners in a professional service firm, or managers in a ‘normal’ enterprise. Taking on a
26 consultancy role in large firms is viewed as a way to move along a career path more rapidly
27 than would be possible in other contexts. They estimate approximately five years to secure a
28 managerial position, compared to 10–15 years pursuing an in-house career in a normal
29 enterprise.

30 *«In practice, I wanted to get as much... experience as possible in in order to be*
31 *autonomous in the future management of a company and add value, I therefore*
32 *decided, so to speak, to prostitute myself with highest bidder in terms of experience,*
33 *as long as my experience curve remains vertical, and at the moment it is clear that*
34 *I will change [employer]»*

35 [Tiziano, 25, PSF employee]

36 Being a corporate consultant is considered prestigious; only the very best students have the
37 opportunity to access these jobs, and the organizations themselves frequently and actively
38 recruit top graduates from elite universities (Kieser and Groß, 2006; Rivera, 2012). The
39 professionalism of this group is profoundly informed by a corporate identity premised on
40 elitism (Alvesson, 2006; Gill, 2015). The elitist discourse (Alvesson, 2006; Gill, 2015) is
41 sustained by the stringent selection processes at each career step (with higher requirements in
42 PSFs, and lower in medium-sized firms), which are based on an ‘up or out’ strategy. Career
43 progression is not optional, rather, it is a requirement for ‘staying in the game’ (Morris and
44 Pinnington, 1998; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Alvehus and Spicer, 2012; Stenger, 2017).

45 Professionalism is an exercise in conformism; in order to go up, they conform to the preferred
46 behavioural standards of the corporation; usually being hardworking, reliable, and willing to
47 defer to the hierarchy (Grey, 1998; Stenger, 2017). They also need to appear professional in

1 dress, language use, and even in how they have fun, as an elite professional is expected to do
2 (Grey, 1998; Alvehus and Spicer, 2012; Rivera, 2012; Costas *et al.*, 2016).

3 For this cluster of management consultants, the company is the locus of their professionalism
4 (Kipping, 2011; Muzio *et al.*, 2011; Fincham, 2012). Being professional entails meeting the
5 requirement of quantifiable productivity parameters in order to climb the internal hierarchy of
6 the firm, rather than an opportunity for sharing competencies and skills with a community of
7 peers (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012). The company itself uses professionalism as a way to control
8 its employees, for shaping their consultancy style and ensuring their loyalty to the company
9 (Kipping, 2011).

10 *«You enter the *company* and are immediately strongly settled, you are framed in*
11 *a model of work that is theirs, which is standardised and evolved over time, and it*
12 *works as well »*

13 [Lamberto, 34, SME employee]

14 Interestingly, none of the PSF partners were in this cluster, suggesting that even in a PFS,
15 becoming a partner requires a stronger attachment to the consultancy profession. Not all the
16 respondents clustered within this type are PSF employees; some are employed in medium-sized
17 companies. None of them is self-employed nor a collaborator/partner in a small professional
18 partnership. Furthermore, none of the interviewees in this group has ever aligned with a
19 professional association.

20

21 **The ‘unwilling’ consultant**

22 *«I decided to become a consultant [...] because I understood that there was no*
23 *future... I didn't see any future, not only in terms of development, but mostly not*
24 *too much chance of... of keeping my job at the end. This has happened to me, but I*
25 *think it is an experience that was very common during the '80s and '90s. In short,*
26 *it has happened to many workers, really MANY [...]. There are a lot of companies*
27 *that don't mean anything to you, but in the past they were training companies for*
28 *information systems, my company *** reached 4000-5000 employees by the end of*
29 *the '80s, yes it did, and now... in just 15 years, 10 years, there is nothing left»*

30 [Mario, 53, Partner in a PPs]

31 The ‘unwilling’ consultant cluster of management consultants is composed of consultants who
32 had already reached executive positions in a non-consultancy firm, but for various reasons
33 (company failure or restructuring, or due to being made redundant), they had been forced to
34 relinquish their managerial roles. They represent the ‘collateral damage’ arising from the
35 reorganization of companies and services, as part of a general trend towards de-industrialisation
36 in advanced capitalist societies. Only five interviewees are grouped into this cluster, but their
37 biographies are consistent enough to form a distinct group. They are all middle-aged males,
38 with variable educational profiles (two have only secondary school diplomas) and variable
39 occupational status. One is a senior consultant in a SME, one is a freelance consultant, three
40 are collaborators or partners in small professional partnerships (see Table A1 in appendix).

41 Since dismissal from their previous managerial posts, they have pursued a career in
42 consultancy, because it is the easiest way to exploit their competencies. However, they perceive
43 their current position as beneath their previous roles as managers. These ‘unwilling’ consultants
44 have had to navigate the social trauma of losing their jobs, an event that interrupted their
45 planned career progress (Dubar, 1998; Ybema, 2004; Mendehall *et al.*, 2008; Costas and Grey,
46 2014). However, their narratives of failure and nostalgia are softened by the fact that they were

1 able to reinvent themselves as consultants, although with varying degrees of success.
2 Nevertheless, because their career patterns have diverged from the traditional upward model,
3 their roles as management consultants are referred to in negative terms, suggesting a view of
4 success based on rising income or hierarchical advancements (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012).

5 *«You have been an employee for 20 years, you have been under the brand of a big
6 company, isn't it? You had relationships with clients, but, hey, you don't have your
7 own relationships, you don't have a market... let's do the freelance, yes, and then
8 how do you find your clients? Who are you? Which referees can you name?
9 Nobody»*

10 [Mario, 53, Partner in a PPs]

11 *«I would divide the consulting world into two big sectors, that is, one of
12 professional consultants and one of the managers, let's call them like that. In other
13 words, those who at a certain point in their career offer themselves as consultants.
14 But the main difference is that the professional consultant has actually developed
15 an approach and technical skills, while the manager just replicates his own
16 experience and just transfers it to clients»*

17 [Pietro, 48, freelance in exclusive licensing for a SME company]

18 The professionalism of this cluster is bolstered by being part of two worlds, and the concept of
19 hybridity describes their ambivalent understanding of what it means to be professional
20 (Noordegraaf, 2007). They represent a partial combination of the two logics of managerialism
21 and professionalism; a hybrid professionalism proceeding from the amalgamation of normally
22 separated elements that are central and moderately persistent, but still not entirely cohesive,
23 imparting a feeling of 'unease' (Noordegraaf, 2015: 188). Professional associations were used
24 instrumentally at the beginning of their self-employment as places to find peers, potential
25 partners, assignments and collaboration opportunities, but mostly just to avoid feeling alone.

27 **Management consultants as Professionals: the 'self'-employed and the 'professional 28 consultant'**

29 These two clusters are distinct from the previous two, in that the main positioning of
30 interviewee narratives is the professional. However, in the everyday language of Italian
31 management consultants, 'professional' means something slightly different to what is theorised
32 in sociological debate. In the words of the interviewees, being a professional means having
33 complete autonomy to self-manage and complete one's own tasks, a belief based on
34 emphasising expertise and market success (Maestripieri, 2016). Thus, the term 'professional'
35 is ambivalent, indicating someone who is freelance and selling services successfully to the
36 market, while also being synonymous with recognised competence in an expert occupation.

37 The prevailing meaning of professional (expert or freelance) distinguishes between the two
38 clusters in this section. In the case of the 'professional consultant', there is a clear tendency to
39 assume a clear-cut professional project centred on a set of specialist consulting services. By
40 contrast, for the 'self'-employed cluster, workers are willing to be autonomous, with the
41 primary goal of remaining in the market, regardless of the scope of services offered.

43 **The 'self'-employed**

44 *«In the condition of someone who works like me [freelance], a consultant is also
45 an entrepreneur and you have no certainty. Because I am clearly dependent on the*

1 *market and the market is not a fixed variable, it is always changing. Then, if you*
2 *are able to be in there, you are also able to give yourself stability»*

3 [Raffaele, 50, freelance]

4 Management consultants in this cluster present themselves as self-employed workers, a
5 condition that enables them to exercise consulting services with complete autonomy and
6 freedom. Two main pathways to self-employment emerged from the interviews. One group
7 entered the labour market as self-employed workers, because they have always been attracted
8 by freedom. For the other group, the decision to become self-employed was made after a period
9 as an employee, and arose from choosing autonomy over wealth and security. The 10
10 interviewees grouped into this cluster are mainly stand-alone freelancers, with three being
11 owners of their own small service companies. Only one offers specialised services, while the
12 others are ‘general’ freelance workers (Cucca and Maestripieri, 2014), locally based and
13 serving micro firms, offering consultancy among other services, such as training, education at
14 universities or at advanced vocational training centres, and tax and business advice. All of these
15 interviewees are middle-aged, and only two of the ten are women.

16 In this cluster, the content of the management consultants work is not relevant to defining what
17 it means for them to be professional. The most important point is their occupational status
18 “beyond” management consultancy, that is, being self-employed. These interviewees had
19 decided to offer consultancy services after observing that consultants were attractive in the
20 market. As such, their consulting activities are not easily distinguishable from the services of
21 tax advisors, the most common external support staff for SMEs. Consultancy does not afford a
22 strong anchor for their professional identity. They are what their clients need them to be (Cross
23 and Swart, 2018).

24 *«Being a freelance has never been a concern, I will work, I will earn, I will have*
25 *job, never a concern. I always thought, do you have a network of people? Then,*
26 *feed it. You have to prove yourself a person that people like, someone in whom they*
27 *find utility and then people call you back »*

28 [Alice, 55, freelance]

29 *«If I thought of tax advisors, lawyers, notaries which are regulated professions,*
30 *things are not so different. I have seen advisors who did terrible damages, in this*
31 *case it is the market that has to be selective»*

32 [Iacopo, 55, Partner in a PPs]

33 From the perspective of ‘self’-employed interviewees, competencies have to be ratified by the
34 market, not by institutions or organizations. They embody the principles of market
35 fundamentalism in their everyday professional practice: consumers know it best, markets will
36 determine what is right, collegial orders are attempts to collect monopoly rents, there is no need
37 for a code of ethics (Leicht, 2016). In line with the notion of commercialised professionalism
38 (Hanlon, 1998), consultants in this cluster feel professional, because the client is content with
39 the service they provide and is willing to purchase their expertise. That is, competence is
40 defined by market success and a professional is the person who is able to sell his/her own
41 services on the market. Thus, for this group, membership of a professional association becomes
42 just one of the various sources of distinction they can use as a strategic tool for competing with
43 peers.

44 45 **The ‘professional’ consultant**

1 «Since consultancy is a profession, it has a series of experiential elements that are
2 built up over time, in terms of relationships with people, of client management etc.,
3 which cannot be extemporised, and can be acquired only through experience»

4 [Pietro, 48, freelance in exclusive licensing for a SME company]

5 Differing from the previous three categories, the largest cluster of interviewees (26) are
6 employed in various types of organizations, with differing employment status. The participants
7 in this cluster share a strong passion for their jobs; providing consultancy services is something
8 that satisfies their personal desires and career ambitions. All the interviewees in this cluster
9 have a degree, and although there was a bias in the direction of management (16), several
10 practitioners had come from unusual disciplines for a management consultant, including
11 astronomy, chemistry, and philosophy. Women represent more than one third of this group,
12 with junior and senior consultants equally distributed (see Table A2 in appendix). The two
13 partners in PSFs are classified here.

14 Expertise is what drives their discourse on professionalism, and it is the feature they share with
15 the purest ideal-typical forms of professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007). They apply abstract
16 knowledge to specific cases, but became experts through their everyday practice, stressing the
17 role of organizations as the main locus of professional socialisation (Anteby et al, 2016).

18 «We do not have a structured and systematic assessment, we do not have a mark.
19 What we do regularly is a meeting, it is called a technical meeting, in which we all
20 gather, and present to our colleagues what we do [...] these assessments are
21 periodic with our colleagues and we build together the lessons learnt»

22 [Aldo, 44, SME employee]

23 Knowledge and skills are codified within their organizations, more so than in associations or in
24 the context of university education. These practitioners learn how to behave and how to react
25 appropriately by imitating their colleagues in everyday practice. For this reason, their
26 professionalism cannot be defined as pure (Noordegraaf, 2007), as there is no institutionalised
27 control of professional practices, because neither of the two Italian management consultancy
28 associations has sufficient members or power to serve as the principal actor to define, develop
29 and control professionalism. Even stand-alone professionals share the same approach to
30 professionalism. In their case, the process of professional exchange occurs through
31 collaborative networks, which are only partially populated by colleagues encountered in
32 professional associations. Being included in networks of the usual collaborators at larger
33 professional partnership is fundamental for updating and developing their knowledge
34 (Maestripieri and Cucca, 2018).

35 «I have always followed this strategy. I had one or two main clients from which I
36 earned real money, and then three to four, and even more buyers that supported me
37 more with relationships, communication and learning. These latter projects are less
38 remunerative, but I usually learn more, while the more remunerative projects
39 usually have a lower rate of innovation. The risk I might incur is clear: if I only
40 pursue less innovative projects, when they end, I might find myself out of the market,
41 while having relationships with three to four larger consultancy firms avoids this
42 risk, as I do special activities for them»

43 [Antonio, 61, freelance]

44 Distinct from the corporate professionalism of 'yuppies', this cluster uses its own agency to
45 develop its own professionalism within the organization in which they work or with whom they
46 collaborate. They do not exhibit a superficial conformism to a consultancy style similar to the
47 first cluster: they embrace the professionalism of their organization, but only as a starting point

1 for developing their own consulting style. Consequently, when their occupational conditions
2 changed, or when they had migrated from one organization to another, they are not driven
3 exclusively by a desire for upward career momentum (in terms of income or hierarchy). Their
4 primary incentive is often to find new opportunities for collaboration and because they are
5 attracted by interesting projects. The career path for these individuals might involve lateral
6 movements, shifting between self-employment and dependent work in various type of
7 organizations.

8 *«When I was working in a chemical company, I resigned to do an MBA in Bologna*
9 *[...] in which the majority of the courses were from *company* consultants. Then,*
10 *I had an internship in a chemical company, but when I realised that they were*
11 *looking for personnel in *company* I applied, because it was really... I was really*
12 *passionate about the themes, with the way they presented their company to us and*
13 *I said to myself 'let's try it' and the passion was born. Because it is really a matter*
14 *of passion for those who do this job»*

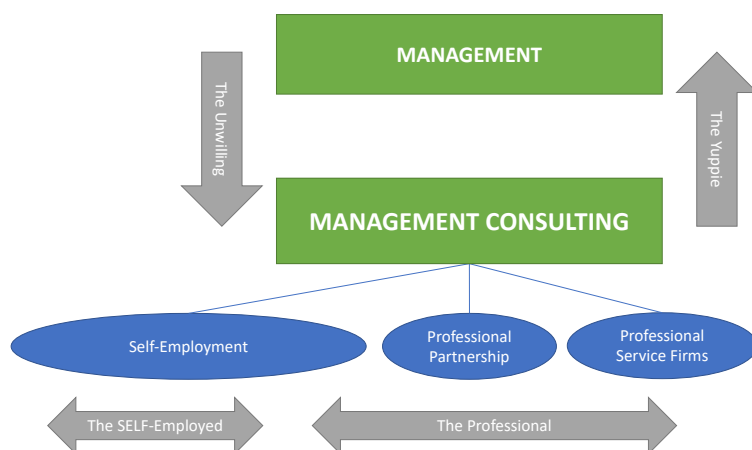
15 [Ada, 32, freelance in exclusive licensing for a SME company]

16 Interviewed consultants in this cluster display a strong emotional affiliation to the profession,
17 despite changes in work settings and different work content. There are signs of the emergence
18 of 'pure' professionalism among them, but it is not based on the involvement of formal
19 recognition and the central role of a professional association. As either employees or freelance,
20 the core of their professionalism is the content of their consultancy services, the projects they
21 are able to work on, and the methodologies they develop in a continual desire to improve and
22 fine-tune their own professional skills, which are shared with peers in personal networks or in
23 their organizations.

24 25 **Discussion: Towards a typology of professionalisms**

26 Figure 1 summarised the evidence presented in the results section. The four clusters of Italian
27 management consultants are placed in relation to work settings and orientations to map the
28 configurations of management consulting professionalism. Work settings and career orientation
29 give the coordinates to map professionalism in management consulting. Although
30 professionalism is a powerful resource for all clusters of management consultants, the type of
31 professionalism changes across clusters (Table 2).

32
33 **Figure 1 – Orientations and work settings in the four clusters of Italian management**
34 **consultancy. Arrows indicate transitions along work settings and orientations.**



1
 2 The cluster ‘*professional consultant*’ (26 interviewees) is the only one present in all work
 3 settings and is characterised by a stable orientation to management consultancy along
 4 interviewee biographies, which is stronger than work-setting affiliation.

5 Professionalism in this cluster is an *organizing professionalism* (Noordegraaf, 2015), because
 6 professionals are socialised to management consultancy inside the organization (or the
 7 network) in which they are embedded. However, their professionalism extends beyond the
 8 conformist application of corporate norms which characterises ‘yuppies’. It goes beyond this,
 9 because management consultants display agency through the manner in which they make their
 10 organization’s professionalism their own personal way of interpreting the concept. They offer
 11 expert knowledge developed through experience, are committed to and passionate about their
 12 work, independently basing decisions on their own judgement (Kitay and Wright, 2007). Their
 13 identification with the profession is strong, revealed in a tendency to prefer the development of
 14 innovative consulting practices and the foundation of new partnerships when progressing along
 15 their career, which might proceed along different work settings. In fact, the same interviewee
 16 might have changed work setting along own biography.

17 The other three clusters instead show a concentration within a specific work setting. ‘*Unwilling*’
 18 management consultants (5 interviewees) are mainly found in self-employment, as freelance
 19 practitioners or partners in small professional partnerships. They demonstrate a stable
 20 orientation towards management consulting as well, but it has not always been so. They have
 21 arrived in management consultancy as a second-best option, after the loss of a job in
 22 management, which still represents the main orientation of their narratives. Their identification
 23 with management consultancy is weak, as it is perceived as a fall-back position from
 24 management.

25 Professionalism in this cluster is a *hybrid professionalism* (Noordegraaf, 2007): managerial
 26 logic is juxtaposed with professional logic here, as the management consultants belonging to
 27 this cluster are ex-managers who have entered consulting as a fall-back role. Their
 28 professionalism is strongly influenced by their previous experience as managers, which results
 29 in the replication of previously learnt managerial practices. Professional practices are not
 30 clearly separated from managerial experience; hybridity between the two logics
 31 (professionalism and managerialism) is the natural consequence.

32 The remaining two clusters concentrate mainly in two work settings: ‘*yuppies*’ are employees
 33 in PSFs, and the ‘*self*’-employed are freelance or (less frequently) work as partners in small
 34 professional partnerships. In both cases, their identification with management consulting is
 35 weak, temporary and mainly instrumental. Traditional professional affiliation is implicitly

1 assumed to be life-long, but not in this case; it is an ‘image’ of professionalism used temporarily
 2 at the convenience of the interviewee (Kipping, 2011).

3 Professionalism among ‘yuppies’ is *corporate professionalism* (Muzio *et al.*, 2011):
 4 professional discourse is deeply embedded in practices, narratives, and routines that belong to
 5 the large PSF in which the management consultants operate as professionals, usually relying
 6 on models and activities organized at the corporate level. Their professionalism is strategic and
 7 one of convenience.

8 Professionalism among ‘self-employed’ is a *commercialised professionalism* (Hanlon, 1998):
 9 professionalism is a rhetorical argumentation based on commercial activity as a self-employed
 10 consultant, and is used to claim legitimacy as an expert in the market, without strong
 11 commitment to a specialised body of knowledge. As soon as the market demand changes,
 12 professionals in this cluster will adapt the services they offer accordingly.

13

14 **Table 2 – A typology of MC professionalisms**

	Orientation	Direction	Professionalism	Work Setting
The ‘yuppie’	Manager	Transition	Corporate professionalism	Dependent work in PFSs
The ‘unwilling’	Professional	Persistence	Hybrid professionalism	Self-employment (freelance and Professional partnership)
The ‘self’-employed	Manager	Persistence	Commercialised professionalism	Self-employment
The ‘professional’	Professional	Transition	Organizing professionalism	All

15

16 Reflecting on Table 2, there are three important issues stemming from the empirical evidence.
 17 First, the clusters ‘yuppies’ and ‘unwilling’ demonstrate the permeability between management
 18 and management consulting, and enable discussing to what extent there is (still) a boundary
 19 between the two. In traditional terms, management consultants have always been seen as
 20 ancillary figures to management in their role as agents of managerial power (Fincham, 2003)
 21 and of organizational change (Muzio *et al.*, 2013). But the empirical evidence in the paper shows
 22 how these figures are two sides of the same coin; “wanna-be” managers go to consulting to
 23 learn the practice of management, failed managers go back to consulting when their career as
 24 managers is over. Sturdy *et al.* (2014) remark that there is a proactive recruitment of consultants
 25 into management positions, especially if the consultant has been employed in major global
 26 firms. This implies that managerial practices are hybridizing with consultancy, but the empirical
 27 evidence shows that consultancy is hybridizing with management as well. That is, in
 28 anticipation of a management career perspective as shown by ‘yuppies’, or ex-post for
 29 implementation of past strategies as in ‘unwilling’.

30 Secondly, work settings matters, but the strength of affiliation to profession does too. Two
 31 clusters (‘self-employed’ and ‘yuppie’) are characterised by weak emotional attachment to the
 32 profession. In the first case, a strong investment in consulting is considered an impediment to
 33 future change in the service offered to the market. Consequently, professionalism is a self-
 34 promotion strategy towards potential clients and it is assumed temporarily, only as long as the
 35 return on this investment is positive. For ‘yuppie’, the weak consultancy affiliation does not
 36 allow going beyond a conformist and instrumental adherence to the discourse of
 37 professionalism proposed by their corporation. Hence, professionalism is a discourse imposed

1 by their organisations from above and accepted for convenience, as long as it is profitable for
2 their future career prospects as managers.

3 Last but not least, management consultants display peculiarities in the way they embody the
4 organizing professionalism of the ‘professional’ cluster. Professionalism in this case represents
5 the discourse closest to pure forms of professionalism within management consultants
6 (Noordegraaf, 2007), regarding the importance accorded to expertise and commitment to
7 profession. But, according to the literature (Noordegraaf 2007 and 2015), pure professionalism
8 is the outcome of a process of institutionalization driven by professional association.
9 ‘Professional’ management consultants refuse categorically to follow this type of
10 professionalisation; more than the role of institutions, they rather stress the importance of
11 expertise which is built and shared in the work setting within which they work.

12 Socialization is the process by which members of an occupational community acquire values,
13 norms and worldviews that are considered important, and shared and respected within this
14 community (Anteby et al, 2016). Professional consultants differ from ‘collegial’ forms of
15 professionalism, because their socialisation to management consultancy arises through a
16 reflexive mechanism, in which the practices are shared with peers and within work settings,
17 thus generating multiple professional communities. This empirical evidence confirms once
18 more the emergence of new forms of professionalism, triggered by the intersections of
19 organizational logics with professions among ‘new’ management occupations (Heusinkveld et
20 al, 2018). But it also advances knowledge in the field, as professionalism is not only mediated
21 by corporations. Small partnerships or stable networks of collaboration can also become loci of
22 professionalism.

23 In summary, the evidence presented in the study demonstrated that in the context of Italian
24 management consultancy, there are different professionalisms, and they are contemporaneously
25 present in the field. Of these, the ‘organizing professionalism’ is the purest. Discursive stances
26 of professionalism help them achieve the legitimacy, status and trust that collegial professions
27 have achieved through institutions (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Muzio et al, 2011). Each
28 work setting, however, requires different argumentations for obtaining this outcome, a possible
29 explanation of the association noted between work setting and type of professionalism. Work
30 settings, however, include not only corporations, smaller organizations and stable networks of
31 collaboration for self-employed management consultants can also constitute a source of
32 professionalism.

33

34 **Conclusions**

35 This article has investigated the role that work settings, comprising types of organizations and
36 employment status, play in developing different varieties of professionalism within
37 management consultancy in Italy. Thanks to an inductive analysis of 55 interviews with
38 management consultants in Italy, it produced a typology comprising four clusters:
39 ‘professional’, ‘yuppie’, ‘unwilling’ and ‘self’-employed. Each one has been considered in
40 relation to work setting, in order to map discourses associated with the management consulting
41 profession: organising professionalism, corporate professionalism, hybrid professionalism and,
42 finally, commercialised professionalism. In line with previous studies (Kitay and Wright, 2007;
43 Suddaby et al, 2009), the empirical evidence shows the presence of an association between
44 professionalisms and the work setting in which discourses are shared and socialised. Organizing
45 professionalism is the sole discourse which is diffuse in all work settings (see cluster
46 “professional). Other discourses are context-dependent and more likely to be found in specific
47 work settings (see clusters: ‘yuppie’, ‘unwilling’ and ‘self’-employed). The type of

1 organization and the employment status of the practitioner are relevant dimensions for mapping
2 professionalisms in the field.

3 The results demonstrated that applying a discursive definition of professionalism reveals the
4 professionalisms of Italian management consultants as plural; multiplicity and heterogeneity
5 are confirmed to be the stylistic hallmarks of management consultancy professionalism (Kitay
6 and Wright, 2007). For Italian consultants, multiple professionalisms are accepted as different,
7 but equally acceptable ways of enacting consultancy. Given the heterogeneity emerging from
8 the day-to-day practices among the interviewed consultants, one could argue that multiplicity
9 hides multiple professions and not simple multiple discourses on professionalism. Yet, even
10 accepting this interpretation, it is the specific work setting in which consultancy is performed
11 that defines the prevalence of one type over another. The resulting fragmentation is a legacy of
12 the multiplicity of work settings, rather than a consequence of weak professional commitment
13 from practitioners. This article shows that discourses on professionalism are local and
14 contingent, resulting from certain times, places, networks, organizations and people that
15 comprise the work setting (Cohen et al, 2005).

16 Table 2 expands upon the previous literature on professionalism in management consultants,
17 emphasising the role played by work settings in defining professional discourse. The value
18 added by the typology outlined above is that it connects with previous debates on
19 professionalism (Hanlon, 1998; Noerdegraaf, 2007 and 2015; Muzio *et al.*, 2011), reshaping
20 and applying previously theorised concepts to interpret the empirical evidence yielded by the
21 study. Instead of introducing new jargon, the study provides empirical support for previous
22 theoretical analyses by demonstrating how multiple discourses might co-exist within the same
23 professional arena (Butler and Collins, 2016). This typology of professionalisms offers several
24 advantages for the community of scholars. Primarily, it accounts for multiplicity, and as a
25 consequence, does not privilege any particular pattern of professionalism, showing that they
26 can all have the same legitimacy. Secondly, it provides a connection between already theorised
27 models of professionalism, helping to systematize recent theory on professions without adding
28 further neologisms. Thirdly, it can be applied in future research to test the validity of its
29 heuristic capacity as an analytical frame.

30 Heterogenous forms of professionalism are not the exception, but the rule when studying the
31 'new' management occupations. Professions are institutional agents that trigger change in
32 organizational fields (Scott, 2008; Muzio et al, 2013). Hence, the increasing heterogeneity in
33 professionalism might impact on the future evolution of organizations. But results of this
34 investigation show that professionalism is a contextual and dynamically evolving phenomenon
35 as well. Work settings, as a combination of the type of organizations and employment status,
36 also have an impact on the type of professionalism sustained by practitioners. This circular
37 relationship leads me to conclude that organizations and professionalisms are irreducible
38 factors that cannot effectively be studied separately. This calls for a new understanding of their
39 role in the professionalization of 'new' management occupations.

40

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