

Specialization and Credentialing, Part 1

This is a post in our occasional 'Advanced Topics in World Building' series. [See this post for an introduction](#) to this series of high-level discussions for the experienced world builder. An index of these posts can be viewed on the ["Free Info"](#) tab.



As societies become more complex, people who are specialists in a field gain social status. If their status is great enough, or they organize and have collective clout, they may also gain considerable economic and political power.

If you have a complex society[1] and want to establish powerful interest groups that are plugged into the big systems in the world, it makes sense to consider who has become specialized and gained a lot of influence in the society. This post will give you some insights into how this works, and how you will need to structure things if you want to duplicate this pattern in your world. (For more on the world building aspects of this post, see the "From the World Building Angle" section at the end.)

Specialization and What It Leads To

Let's assume this is the case in your world. Your society is at least at an early industrial level of development, far enough along that people have begun to specialize in their occupations. Factory workers are getting specialized training; professions are starting to emerge.

If specialization is common and the work is complex, then sooner or later there is a trend towards a system of credentials and certifications. This move generally brings with it both bureaucracy and a political and economic presence for the specialists and their organization. The process goes like this:

Specialization → Credentialing → Bureaucratic Expansion =

Political / Economic / Social Influence

This process can create sweeping change in a society and the work of the specialty, so this is something to consider carefully before it is introduced. Or, if you are allowing a society to specialize in a manner like our own, you may not have much choice about this stage of development. In either case, a world builder needs to think through the consequences of having an occupational sector controlled or influenced by a powerful group of specialists, for their influence can extend far beyond the boundaries of whatever it is they do.

Specialization and Status

Here's a rule of thumb:

**The more specialized a worker becomes, the more esoteric
their knowledge is and the more valued their services are.**

More specialization means the worker commands rare knowledge, and this often translates into higher social status—at first among peers, but if the work itself is high status, then the worker's standing increases in the eyes of the general public, too.

For instance, a certified insurance broker may have higher status in his industry than his uncertified peers, but to the general public they are all “just insurance people.” (Sorry, insurance people!) A brain surgeon, on the other hand, is already in a high status profession; compared to a general medical doctor, the public will hold him in even higher regard because of his status as an elite surgeon.

Protecting the Interests of the Group

Specialists often band together not only to share collegial information, but to control what is going on in “their” field. At the most common end of the scale we see groups like unions emerging. While they are generally thought of as an economic force, they also tend to be organizations of specialists. Take a machinist's union, for instance: group membership and certification of skill levels both serve as credentials for the machinists who join. They are both union members and specialized workers. People with this paired set of interests are in the perfect position to influence many things in their occupation, from how a new machinist should be trained to how a retiring one should be pensioned, and much that lies in between.

In more technical fields like air conditioning repair or IT services, certification emerges as a way to guarantee someone's claims of specialized expertise. Technical associations allow these specialists to exert their influence. In higher-status occupations, we see the professionalization of occupations such as law and medicine, but also of many other fields in more complex societies. It turns out that professionals like to control how their professions are practiced, and the groups they affiliate in tend to become some of the most influential of all.



Credentialing

Credentials signify authority and status in a field. At its simplest, the process of credentialing means a group of specialists have gotten together and agreed what it takes to do what they do. First they offer to certify someone's standing in their occupation. Then they lobby or pressure other organizations (business groups, educational institutions, legislatures, etc) to make this certification a requirement to practice the specialty.

Once a person has the necessary credential, they can work with the blessing of the organization and other social institutions. Without it, a specialist may have a hard time getting a job or may not be allowed to do his work at all.



An organization of specialists can angle for economic advantage, privileges, legal considerations, or get government or public sanction to function. The more effective groups succeed in getting laws passed about their credentials. We've seen this happen with medicine and the law, where the framework of training and employment is shaped by many statutes and regulations that were pushed for by the specialists themselves.

Credentials can become an absolute requirement for people to work in a specialized field. Even if laws are silent on the matter, employers or the public may have their own expectations about credentials. Library science is an example of a field like this. The day that someone who only knew the Dewey Decimal system could run a public library is long past. Today librarians must be graduates of a Master of Library Science program and have the diploma to prove it, in order to get hired as a librarian. There is no statutory requirement for this level of qualification. Rather, it is the outgrowth of a social expectation of professionalism and the trend towards credentialing people through education.

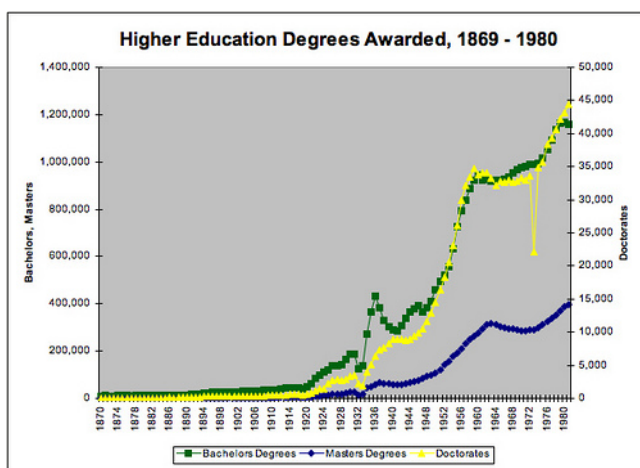
Status and Educational Shifts

In our world, credentialing represents a shift from on-the-job training or apprenticeship-type systems to organizations of specialists influencing expertise and employment in their field. And here's something interesting about the exclusivity of these groups:

If a group requires credentials to get into, the group members usually also enjoy unequal rewards and power because of their high status.[2]

In a sociological sense, credentialing legitimates inequality and reinforces boundaries between different status groups.

Once educational institutions become involved in credentialing, a trend develops to educate for the sake of credentials instead of for actual skills learned. We can see this in our contemporary society in the U.S., where a college degree has become necessary to get hired for any good entry level job, regardless of what the degree is in. At entry level it is generally not the skill set that matters so much as the credential that demonstrates a person has gone to college.



This brings us to a more specialized (haha) and critical meaning of "credentialing," one used in a specific sociological sense to mean the tendency of educational systems to issue credentials which bolster status systems. It is a process that emerges from the interaction of influential specialist organizations, the nature of the labor market, and mutually reinforcing elites and status groups.

This is a rather involved process beyond the scope of this post, but if you'd like to know more, you can read a great overview of the dynamics and problems associated with credentialing [in this 2001 paper](#) by sociologist David Brown.

From the World Building Angle

If you want to figure out who the elites and power players are in your (complex) world and use them to good effect, one approach is to look at who is specialized and who has become high status. What groups of affiliation have they formed? What are they doing to further the interests of their little (or large) group of specialists? Who are their rivals? Who is helping to expand their power, and how?

There may not be conscious intent behind this (just as universities are not conspiring to make librarians the elite information guardians we all know they are[3])--but collusion happens because of how these systems and unthinking group and social forces interact with each other.

Specialists create organizations, and those organizations advocate for things that make specialists secure and expand their influence.

Remember: credentials make a specialist; a specialist has status and hence unequal power and rewards. That's a position worth protecting, yes? So how are your high status elites doing that? (Any specialist group is doing it, but the more powerful ones are bigger movers and shakers, and probably more fun to analyze in this manner.)

How are these elements working together in your world? Who is being bolstered, and who is being disadvantaged, and in what ways? Flow charts and mind maps are good for this, I find: something that lets you draw clumps of specialist groups and lines to connect how they interact with other organizations (aka interest groups and power elites) like legislatures, sources of finance, seats of education, and so on.

Part 2

In Part 2 of this Specialization series I'll look at how credentials work in practice, their social and organizational impact, and examine the medical profession as an example. That will probably post in about a week.

***Did you like what you read here? Have some questions or remarks on the content?
Please share your thoughts in the Comments below!***

1. Complex society: this term has somewhat different meanings in different social science disciplines. Here I am using it in the sociological sense, which I will define in a future post in more detail. For now, let's understand a "complex society" to be one that is early industrial, industrial, modern, post-modern, or futuristic. Societies at these levels develop higher levels of interdependencies, specializations, and complex systems than do pre-industrial civilizations.
2. Credentials and the unequal rewards of high status: see the work of sociologist Randall Collins. His classic book on the subject is *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, Academic Press, 1979.
3. Says the former librarian. ;)