

“What the hell is *that* ?”: The representation of professional service markets in *The Simpsons*¹

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Abstract. *This paper makes productive connections between two forms of representation -- formal scholarship on professional service workers and their depictions in The Simpsons cartoon series -- such that both may be exceeded. In considering the show's representations of Attorney Lionel Hutz and Dr Nick Riviera, I ponder the ways in which the market-based behaviours of these 'expert' individuals are so repeatedly targeted for satire. Through a detailed dissection of The Simpsons' scripts, I show how, on the one hand, the show to a large degree reflects critical thinking on the nature of the 'professional project' yet, on the other, offers some rather more ambivalent, even sympathetic, notions of professional identity.*

Key words. *fictional representation; satire; professional identity; markets*

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Introduction

Two conversations set in the offices of professional service providers in Springfield, fictional home town of The Simpsons -- in the first, Attorney Lionel Hutz has just advised Bart, the Simpson family's ten year old son, to seek compensation after a minor accident:

Bart: [admiringly] "Mr Hutz, when I grow up I want to be lawyer just like you."

Hutz: "Good for you, son. If there's one thing America needs, it's more lawyers. Can you imagine a world without lawyers?"

Hutz: [shuddering as he imagines a scene of people holding hands and dancing around in a circle under a rainbow] "Argh!"

In the second, the family goes on to consult local physician, Dr Nick Riviera, who makes this expert evaluation of Bart's medical condition:

Dr Nick: "Your son is a very sick boy. Just look at these X-rays! You see that dark spot there? Whiplash."

Homer (Bart's father): "Whiplash? Oh no!"

Dr Nick: "And this smudge here that looks like my fingerprint? No. That's trauma."

In examining *The Simpsons*, I concur with Phillips' (1995) assertion that the use of a wide range of fictional representations is a legitimate approach to the study of management (cf. Czarniawska, 1998). In particular, agreeing with Fiske and Hartley's (1978) view that the medium of television merits careful study (see also McMahon 2002) I aim to build on the work of Rhodes (2001b, 2002) in relation to animation and organizational theory. So how might we make sense of the show's representations of

professional identity, typified in the excerpts quoted above? If we accept representation as an 'ordering mode' that can reveal to us the complexities of our social world, then we might ask, after Rhodes (2001a), whether a popular show like *The Simpsons* can provide viewers with representations that subvert existing (market) relations. The show does seem to offer a serious critical commentary alongside its humorous depictions of contemporary social life. This recognition has inspired, *inter alia*, analyses of the family's urban locale of Springfield (Wood and Todd, 2005), portrayals of masculinity at work (Rhodes and Pullen, 2007) and depictions of national 'otherness' (Dobson, 2006). In addition to these studies, I examine the use of humour in the show to represent professional service markets and the identities of those who must work within them. I ask: How is the world of the professional service provider 'ordered' by *The Simpsons*?

To paraphrase Schroeder and Zwick (2004: 22), fictional representations are important since they do not just express notions of phenomena like 'professionalism'; rather they help to form perceptions of professionalism and help construct professional service markets. The writers of *The Simpsons* reinforce popular perceptions of professional roles but also transgress them for some particular effect (cf. Cloud, 1992). A dual representational process is pursued in the series' evocation of professional service markets. As I shall show, in the first of these moves, a satirical critique of the professional project is seemingly taken as a given; while in the second, a rather unexpectedly sympathetic construction of individual professionals buffeted by market forces can be found. My aim is to demonstrate that through its legal and medical characters, working life in *The Simpsons* can be understood as entailing both self-interest and vulnerability in a manner that suggests a poignant social commentary on the nature of professional identity.

The overall argument of this paper is as follows. I observe that *The Simpsons* is a satirical text and argue that satire is a valuable form of representation. I examine what *The Simpsons* says about professional identities and, having introduced some key issues from the sociology and marketing literatures on the professions, I compare and connect the two representations: one fictional and one scholarly, before discussing the significance of these representations for organization studies.

Satirising the professions with *The Simpsons*

It has been claimed that what distinguishes satire from other kinds of comic writing is the desire of the author, whether novelist, scriptwriter or illustrator, to 'mend the world' (Ogborn and Buckroyd, 2001). A focus on human (mis)behaviour has been a feature of English language satire from medieval times, with the use of caricature for political mockery arguably beginning with Hogarth in the 18th century. Graphic portrayals of the follies of the powerful can be found in the subsequent work of cartoonists Gillray and Cruikshank (Donald, 1996). Humorous characterisations representative of different types of authority can be traced through these artists, via writers like Dickens, to theatre and television comedies (Billig, 2005; Ogborn and Buckroyd, 2001). A humorous, mass media text like *The Simpsons* has rich satirical potential since viewers are likely to feel more receptive to didactic messages. Remote control, video and the extent of the media 'chatter' that surrounds TV shows ensures that television becomes a delivery and circulation system *par excellence* for parody (Gray, 2005). The basic mocking function of satire can thus still be found in contemporary market cultures, although I intend to show that *The Simpsons* offers a rather more ambivalent critique of certain authority figures, namely the legal and medical professional. I wish to consider the ways in which these supposed experts

are so repeatedly targeted for satire by the series' writers, and how this might affect (or indeed, reflect) our perceptions of 'the market' for professional services.

Since *The Simpsons* is a cartoon, it is important to consider what the humour of the show says about the professions. With this in mind, I turn to Billig (2005) who reminds us that Bergson observed that while philosophers have often called humans "the laughing animal", they might equally define us as the animal "which is laughed at" (Bergson, 1911: 4). Bergson also asserted that laughter must perform, in his terms, some sort of social 'function' proposing that ridicule was necessary to avoid the comic 'rigidity' to which social life can fall prey. In contemporary society, Billig (2005: 240) argues that if they wish to survive in the 'market-place', organizations "must demonstrate the sort of elasticity that Bergson believed to be essential for the progress of social life". So how 'elastic' are the organizations (and the professionals) evoked in *The Simpsons* in coping with Western society? Moreover, how 'elastic' is the organisation that produces the programme? After all, the artistic production (and subsequent marketing) of TV programmes can be understood as a thoroughly 'corporate' activity. Thus, as much as *The Simpson* can be seen as creator Matt Groening's show, it is clearly still a product of the Fox network. In fact, the show regularly highlights this relationship, while cheerfully denigrating other Fox programmes, thereby signifying both the independence of *The Simpsons* and the apparent 'coolness' of Fox. Thus, as Alberti (2003:7) notes, "This complicated relationship ...encapsulates the potentially circular logic plaguing the idea of 'oppositional' mass media: are Groening et al. using Fox, or is Fox using them?".

In exploring the satire of *The Simpsons*, I highlight the show's representation of the legal and medical professions as personified by Attorney Lionel Hutz and his erstwhile sidekick, Dr Nick Riviera. The series' critique of professionalism is captured both in the vivid depictions of these two characters' frequently appalling behaviour,

and in the notional 'professionalism' of their apparently diametric opposites, Mr Burns' Corporate Lawyers and Dr Julius Hibbert, the Simpsons' GP. An examination of these characters allows us to compare two classic groups of professional for which the cognitive base of their role is (claimed to be) primarily descriptive or prescriptive (Halliday, 1987). In the former case, we find the 'scientific' professions such as medicine; while in the second, lie the 'normative' professions such as the law. Modern Western market societies tend to structure expertise around the professions, thus favouring "employment based on personally held resources, whether of knowledge or wealth" (Abbott, 1988: 324).

A key analytical perspective to the status of the professions is 'the professional project' (Larson, 1977) which recognises that professions are interest groups that may consciously pursue economic interests but may well have other motives such as a pursuit of social status; and the actions of members of professional groups can be seen as a strategy of 'social closure' (Ellis, 1999). Reflecting this strategy, Perkins (1994) believes the professions have succeeded in establishing human capital as the dominant form of wealth thereby giving individual actors independence. The success of this mobility project has been dependent on usurping the 'free' market for professional services, but it remains a constant struggle. As MacDonald (1995: 30) explains: "The professional's possession of knowledge and expertise can be warranted by diplomas, certificates and degrees, but only up to a point. Thereafter... trust will be accorded to those who fit in with the socially accepted standards of repute and respectability". Thus much of a professional's 'work' is aimed at sustaining credibility in a marketplace where claims to truth are continually being tested.

The US cultural context is also important in understanding the representation of professionals in *The Simpsons*. In the 19th century certain elements of US society

viewed the professional project with distain (Halliday, 1987). An emphasis on the right of the individual meant a conscious abstention from interference by the state of economic/capitalist activity, which was interpreted as a duty to prevent any group within society doing the same (MacDonald, 1995). Indeed, there appeared to be such a general distrust of expertise that in medical matters, Americans proclaimed their right to “life, liberty and quackery” (Shyrock, 1947: 262). Thus many American institutions turned away from ‘tradition’ and towards the ideal of the ‘common man’, or populism. Building on this view, Frank (2000) observes: “By their very nature markets confer democratic legitimacy, markets bring down the pompous and the snooty, markets look out for the interests of the little guy, markets give us what we want” (cited in Turner, 2004: 196). Many practitioners of knowledge-based occupations were left to establish their own reputations, and, crucially, “to compete with any lay person who wished to enter the market for services” (MacDonald, 1995: 84).

Indeed, Crane (1989) has shown that that the most important criteria in US lawyer selection are client perceptions of competence, courtesy and credibility. Image, it seems, is vitally important; something also found in marketing studies of US dental and tax advisory services (Clow et al., 1997). In the UK too, the twin pressures of de-regulation and increased competition have forced professional service providers of all types to view the role of marketing much more seriously than hitherto (Morgan and Piercy, 1991). Research has shown legal professional themselves to be acutely aware of such issues, for example in differentiating, in their own words, ‘street level’ from more ‘upmarket’ images (Ellis and Watterson, 2001). Nevertheless, we should not forsake the salience of the professional project in any study of the professional service worker. In discussing claims of increasing managerialism within the legal sector, Ackroyd and Muzio (2007: 744) conclude: “The current changes in the division of labour within legal firms should be understood in the context of the

continuation of the *longu duree* of an historical professionalization project.”. What then are the implications for professional identity construction amidst such market(ing) pressures, and how are these addressed in *The Simpsons*?

Many of the characters in *The Simpsons* are defined and identified by their occupations, and this provides much fuel for the comedy of the series. Moreover, professional characters such as lawyer Lionel Hutz and Dr Nick Riviera seem to be important to the show’s narrative. They are described as part of the ‘regular’ cast by Martyn and Wood (1998), with both making their first appearances in the show’s second series. In the 150 episodes aired between 1990 and 1998 (the year when the actor voicing Hutz died), we find a significant proportion drawing upon representations of the legal and medical professions. Apart from numerous crowd scenes, Hutz appears 25 times in a speaking part, Dr Nick 27 times, Mr Burn’s corporate lawyer 20 and Dr Hibbert 46 (Haynes, 2002; Martyn and Wood, 1998). These cartoon representations allow the writers to treat the characters less as personalities than as caricatures of the ideologies they represent. This means that, unlike many sitcoms (e.g. *Friends* where for much of the series no-one ever knows what job Chandler does), *The Simpsons* is arguably not personality driven; rather, it is about the conflict of ideas. As animated characters, the inhabitants of Springfield can ‘be’ merely the ideas they represent since they do not have to be ‘realistic’ (Tingleff, 1998). This form of mimesis makes the show a fascinating site for the study of identity.

As I turn the spotlight on these particular cartoon characters in all their excessive, hyperbolic glory, my approach follows that of Rhodes and Westwood (2008: 11) who argue that popular culture offers important representations of work and organizations “that exceed those available to theory”. After Taussig (1993), these authors note how the ‘mimetic excess’ of popular cultural representations of organizations allows for a

“suspension of belief” that “begs the recognition that the representations of organizations ... in academic scholarship are also representations and also mimetic” (2008: 46). Thus when we consider social science representations of ‘real’ work alongside fictional representations we find “the creative possibility to connect with culture as a means of understanding actual and possible organizations” (p 47). In this way I hope to make productive connections between more formal scholarship on the identities of professional service workers and their depictions in popular cultural such that both may be exceeded.

The texts examined for depictions of possible organizational selves (Alvesson et al., 2008) in this article are the scripts of *The Simpsons* TV show along with some of its ‘paratexts’ (Gray, 2003) in the form of spin-offs such as books, trading cards and websites. By paying close attention to particular characters’ utterances and interactions, I discern important subtleties in their representations of social order. I have provided a number of illustrative examples for reflecting on professional identities and markets. My reading of *The Simpsons* is analytic in that it sifts and judges items from within the text in their relationship to each other in order to find patterns which fit the whole work. It is also interpretive as I examine how the text interacts with other texts (for instance in seeking support from secondary sources) and how it is situated in society (cf. Gray, 2003; Ogborn and Buckroyd, 2001). Finally, like Frith (1990) and his celebration of pop music, for me any general theory of mass culture must lie in the immediacy of our everyday pleasure in cartoons. I thus also hope to convey in my analysis my own sheer enjoyment of the show. So, let us now examine our two main protagonists and their battles (and, mostly, defeats) in the fight for professional credibility.

Representations of the professions in *The Simpsons*

The legal profession

First impressions can be deceptive: Attorney Lionel Hutz's professional appearance (well-groomed, blue suit, white shirt, red tie) belies the fact that his hair is only neatly styled because he grooms it with a fork (Episode 1F04). Tellingly, Hutz's voice is a "mix of salesman's bluster, lawyerly pomposity and vacillation between self-confidence and utter helplessness" (Turner, 2004: 406). This tension is captured all too readily in the courtroom where his incompetence reigns supreme, as in this exchange from Episode 9F20:

Hutz: "And so, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case."

Judge: "Hmmm. Mr Hutz, do you know that you're not wearing any pants?"

Hutz: "Daaah!! I move for a bad court thingy."

Judge: "You mean mistrial?"

Hutz: "Right!! That's why you're the judge and I'm the law-talking guy."

Judge: "You mean the lawyer?"

Hutz: "Right."

Hutz is only vaguely aware of his lack of expertise, which frequently comes back to haunt him: "That was a right pretty speech, sir [patronisingly]. But I ask you, what is a contract? Webster's defines it as 'an agreement under the law which is unbreakable.' Which is unbreakable!? [panics] Excuse me, I must use the restroom." (Episode 3F04)

This incompetence does not prevent our (anti)hero from avidly seeking clients. The marketization of legal provision in the US is archly portrayed by Hutz's marketing practices. His law office is called "I Can't Believe It's a Law Firm" and is located in Springfield Shopping Mall (Episode 9F05). Hutz promotes his firm in a variety of tacky ways: he has a business card that turns into a sponge and a drawer full of give-

away smoking monkeys (Episodes 7F10 and 9F20). His Yellow Pages advertisement claims “Cases won in 30 minutes or your pizza’s free!” (1F04). He is also a classic ‘ambulance chaser’ and accosts fellow prisoners for business while in jail himself (9F14). Even on those rare occasions when he is appointed by the system, in this case to defend Bart of the suspected murder of his teacher Principal Skinner (Episode 8F03), Hutz reveals his true colours: “Lionel Hutz, court-appointed attorney. I’ll be defending you on charges of...Murder One!? Wow! Even if I lose, I’ll be famous!”

Hutz does his best to assume the trappings of professionalism in his bid to project his credibility. He sometimes even does so to his own surprise, as in Episode 8F08 where he observes that Homer “can’t copyright a drink”, noting that “this all goes back to the Frank Wallbanger case of ’78. How about that?! I looked something up! These books behind me don’t just make the office look good, they’re filled with useful legal tidbits just like that!”. Despite this rare moment of reflection, in his avaricious search for business, Hutz frequently makes preposterous promises. Here (Episode 9F06), his rhetoric evokes the spirit of the ‘common man’, a man (Homer) who is clearly entitled to the ‘best’ legal advice:

Hutz: “Mr Simpson, this is the most blatant case of fraudulent advertising since my suit against the film, ‘The Never-Ending Story’.”

Homer: “So, do you think I have a case?”

Hutz: “Homer, I don’t use the word ‘hero’ very often, but you are the greatest hero in American history.”

This, we should note, is in response to Homer’s claims against an ‘all-you-can-eat’ restaurant that failed to satiate his colossal appetite.

Hutz's attitude to 'the truth' can be contrasted with that of Marge Simpson (Bart's mother) who, due to her inability to lie to her clients, fails to sell a single property during her temporary job at 'Red Blazer Realty' - note the quintessential 'uniform' of sales professionalism (Episode 5F06). This is a firm run by Hutz who is attempting to extend his legal practice. Marge is thus constructed as 'too good' to succeed in the harsh corporate world (Snow and Snow, 2002), a world in which Hutz has apparently learnt to eschew any conventional notions of honesty, despite his legal training. We see this ambivalence toward the truth again in Episode 7F10 when Hutz expresses some surprise at Marge's promise to tell the truth as witness under oath: "She sounded like she was taking that awful seriously."

Lionel Hutz's courtroom nemesis is often the 'Pasty-Faced Lawyer', an adenoidal, sharp-suited lawyer (never named) who is retained by Mr Burns and other corporate clients. Examples of the former (predictably regular) employment include Episode 7F10 where the Pasty-Faced Lawyer defends Burns against a lawsuit for injuring Bart in a car accident; 8F23 where he advises his client over Homer's compensation claim for sterility caused by working at the nuclear plant; and 1F16 where he is hired to wrest custody of Bart from his parents. The use of The Pasty-Faced Lawyer's legal expertise by a corporate master other than Burns is shown in Episode 9F02 when he represents the Disney organization in preventing Principal Skinner using a Disney phrase in a school fund-raising event.

This character also appears in *The Simpsons* as a District Attorney (e.g. Episode 9F20 where he prosecutes Marge for accidentally 'shoplifting' from the Kwik-E-Mart). He almost invariably outwits Hutz in court. The Pasty-Faced Lawyer is thereby presented as a deliberately anonymous professional who represents the interests of corporate capitalism and, sometimes, the state in bringing particularly harsh cases against its citizens. The show's view of such professionals is captured in an

illustration in the spin-off book *Bart Simpson's Guide to Life* where a group of attorneys are shown presenting their bill with half-closed, sardonic eyes and sneers. The group includes the Pasty-Faced Lawyer and is given the collective noun, "a prey of lawyers" (Groening, 1996: 89). Sadly for Hutz, our hapless attorney finds these rival (and well paid) lawyers hugely intimidating, as we see in his reaction to Burns' boasting in Episode 9F05:

Hutz: "Mr Burns, we've got witnesses, precedent and a paper trail a mile long."

Burns: "Yes, but I have ten high-priced lawyers."

Hutz: "Yah, yah, yaaah!!!" [runs out of office]

Homer: "He's left his briefcase. Hey, it's full of shredded newspaper."

So desperate is Hutz to appear important to his clients (the Simpson family), and/or to bluff his way through a negotiation settlement with Burns, that he fills his briefcase with image bolstering padding.

Actually, these scenes of repeated failure typically arise from what is perhaps Hutz's one redeeming feature: he sticks up for 'the little guy', albeit seemingly less out of a sense of altruism or justice, and more out of the pursuit of hard cash (the 'reward' that his training, such as it is, has promised him – Ellis, 1999). And sometimes, just sometimes, he actually wins, as in Bart's lawsuit against the makers of Krusty O's breakfast cereal (Episode 2F32). That Hutz clearly does not 'belong' to the legal profession is shown in his belief that the American Bar Association is a drinking society (*Simpsons Trading Card* No. S31). His resentment (or mere bewilderment) regarding the status that is afforded certain other lawyers is shown in this observation made as he watches TV in Episode 1F03. Note the wonderful recursive irony in a lawyer on a network cartoon series commenting on further fictional representations of his own (fictionalised) profession: "Oh sure [sarcastically], like lawyers work in big

skyscrapers and have secretaries. Look at him! He's wearing a belt! [wistfully] That's Hollywood for ya."

Hutz's desires to spread his areas of 'expertise' are not just confined to real estate (see Episode 5F06 above). This is how he approaches Bart's friend Milhouse in Episode 2F17 who, improbably, has just won a major screen acting role: "Milhouse baby! Lionel Hutz, your new agent, unauthorised biographer and drug dealer..., er, keeper-awayer". Despite such actions, the Simpsons family return for Hutz's services time and time again, suggesting, first, that they are pretty dumb 'common people', and second, that maybe there is no alternative for the poor American citizen seeking legal redress. Allowing for this latter implicit social commentary, the former explanation is returned to by the script's writers, with another dig at the self-credentializing (and client-impressing) practices of the professional:

Homer: [admiring diplomas] "You sure have got some education, Mr Hutz."

Hutz: [impressed with himself] "Yes. Harvard, Yale, MIT, Oxford, the Sorbonne, the Louvre..." (Episode 7F10)

Thus we may see how *The Simpsons* represents the legal profession as obsessed with status, income and notions of expertise, yet also paints a picture of individual professionals struggling to cope with contemporary market forces. Let us now examine how Springfield's medical profession fares in this context, and whether a similarly ambivalent portrayal is to be found.

The medical profession

Lionel Hutz's advertisement in *Bart Simpson's Guide to Life* (Groening, 1996: 134-5) offers clients the chance to "choose from our distinguished staff of expert witnesses", including a "respected doctor". It is illustrated with a picture of Dr Nick Riviera who is

described as “our on-staff ‘physician’”. Thus Hutz appears keen to bolster his own credibility (and that of his clients) by association with an even more ‘respected’ professional, a ‘physician’ (a term, however, that even Hutz’s copywriters are forced to ironicise in quotation marks). We should note that Hutz is not always so respectful to doctors. In Episode 7F10, after the hospital pronounces Bart’s injuries in a traffic accident to be non-serious, he declares to Homer: “Doctors! Pffff! Doctors are idiots...You can ‘ching-ching-ching’ cash in on this tragedy.”

So just what sort of an expert is Dr Nick Riviera, and why does Hutz rely on him and not on other doctors? We gain a glimpse of his professional credentials, again in Episode 7F10, where his office wall bears certificates proclaiming his status, sometimes with quite juvenile ‘student’ humour: “Female Body Inspector”, “Club Med School”, and “I Went to Medical School for Four Years and All I Got was this Lousy Diploma”. It is as if he has never quite grown up, or grown out of being at medical school, where-ever that may have been. The medical profession, however, is keeping tabs on the career of our good doctor and, in Episode 3F18, Riviera is hauled up before the Medical Review Board. In his hearing, he seems to genuinely believe he has done nothing wrong:

Dr Nick: “Hi everybody!”

The Board: “Hi Dr Nick.”

Board Chairman: Dr Nick, this malpractice committee has received a few complaints against you. The most troubling are performing major operations with a knife and fork from a seafood restaurant...”

Dr Nick: “But I cleaned then with my napkin!”

Board Chairman: “...misuse of cadavers...”

Dr Nick: “I get here quicker when I drive in the car-pool lane!”

The opening lines of the above exchange are an ironic nod to Dr Nick’s other life as an inventor of a variety of (highly suspect) products sold on the “I Can’t Believe They

Invented It!” TV shows aired within the series. In these shows, Riviera always enters the studio with a cheery “Hi everybody!” and the audience responds en-masse: “Hi Dr Nick!”. The goods that Riviera then proceeds to endorse include a candy bar that cleans and whitens teeth (Episode 7F13) and “Sun & Run: The Suntan Lotion That’s Also a Laxative” (9F20). The catch phrase serves to distance a media ‘personality’ (however minor) like Dr Nick from the ‘serious business’ of practicing medicine.

Such thoughtless (self) promotion, and the attitudes to surgery outlined in the previous paragraph, are of course potentially lethal. Dr Nick’s dangerous incompetence is frequently revealed in the operating theatre, as here in Episode 2F32 where he readies Bart for surgery: “Whoopsie! Heh! Maybe if I fiddle with these knobs? Hey, I smell gas. Pleasant gas. Night-night gas...[starts to faint]”. In preparing for operations, Riviera’s ignorance is similarly exposed. Here he watches a video on how to do a coronary bypass:

Video Doctor: “...and then, you make the incision below the collarbone”
[splurt]

Dr Nick: “Oh no! Blood! They didn’t tell me about this in medical school!”
(Episode 9F09).

This scene reinforces Riviera’s almost child-like naiveté and hints at the exploitation of this naiveté by an unscrupulous medical school; a school that, in allowing Nick to graduate, may have contributed to his misguided self-belief that he is actually a ‘proper’ doctor.

Later in the same episode, he finally makes it to the operating amphitheatre, one that is augmented with a public viewing gallery. His speech to the crowd shows his delight at gaining free gloves (which he only remembers to don at the last minute), but interestingly also explicitly evokes ‘the law’ as a normative profession of which he

seems to be wary (or to live in a symbiotic relationship with?). Perhaps he lacks faith in the abilities of his attorney colleague/partner in deception, Lionel Hutz, to defend any malpractice charges:

Dr Nick: "Hi everybody!"

Crowd: "Hi Dr Nick!"

Dr Nick: "If something should go wrong, let's not get the law involved. One hand washes the other. Oh, that reminds me! [washes his hands and puts on surgical gloves] These gloves came free with my toilet brush!

Does this reveal Riviera's tacit acceptance that the whole professional image that these two 'experts' (himself and Hutz) have created is just a sham? And a sham that is frighteningly exposed when he points at something (unseen by the viewer) on the operating table as he puts Homer under anaesthetic, and shrieks: "What the hell is *that!*?". Dr Nick stands there for a while, confused. During the operation he starts to sing to himself for reassurance:

"The knee bone's connected to the something,

The something is connected to the red thing,

The red thing is connected to my wrist watch...Uh oh."

Thankfully, the eternal voice of reason in *The Simpsons*, Bart's younger and more studious sister Lisa, who has actually read a medical book, saves the day with appropriate technical advice: a model scientific professional.

Dr Nick's unique level of expertise is also shown in the consulting clinic. In this exchange, he advises Homer on weight control: not, as you might expect, regarding weight loss, but weight *gain* in order that Homer may be declared obese and thus

qualify for disability rights. He does so in a perky, upbeat manner that quite belies the coronary-inducing nature of his advice:

Dr Nick: "You'll want to focus on the neglected food groups, such as the whipped group, the congealed group, and the choc-o-tastic..."

Bart: "You could brush your teeth with milkshakes!"

Dr Nick: [to Bart] "Hey, did you go to Hollywood Upstairs Medical College too? [to Homer] And remember, if you're not sure about something, rub it against a piece of paper. If the paper turns clear, it's your window to weight gain."

(Episode 3F05)

Apart from revealing yet more about Dr Nick's training, what is also notable about this diagnosis is that it comes only after Homer has been referred to Riviera by another medic, Dr Julius Hibbert. Hibbert is a much more fully realised character than the Pasty-Faced Lawyer, Hutz's notionally dichotomous adversary. To a casual Springfield watcher, he may seem like the polar opposite to Dr Nick. The show's writers have given Dr Hibbert a Bill Cosby-esque gravitas in terms of his avuncular appearance and speaking voice. Hibbert's image may be contrasted with the exaggerated Hispanic accent of Dr Riviera, which arguably reflects a lower (or at least different) social status (Hodge, 1996).

Hibbert is the Simpson family's ostensibly more reliable family GP, a man who Homer is reassured to note has taken the "Hippopotamus Oath" (Episode 9F09). This classic Simpsonian ignorance of medical matters is exposed again later in the same episode when the trusted Hibbert attempts to impart some grave news:

Hibbert: "Homer, I'm afraid you'll have to undergo a coronary by-pass operation."

Homer: "Say it in English, Doc."

Hibbert: "You're going to need open heart surgery."

Homer: "Spare me your medical mumbo-jumbo."

Hibbert: "We're going to cut you open and tinker with your ticker."

Homer: "Could you dumb it down a shade?"

The position of the professional expert seems to be secure here, to put it mildly. The ensuing debate over Homer's condition reveals rather more about the US medical system and Hibbert's role within it:

Marge: "We'll do whatever it takes to get my Homey well."

Hibbert: "Good. I must warn you though, this procedure will cost you upwards of \$30,000."

Homer: "Aaaarrgh! [collapses]"

Hibbert: "I'm afraid it's now \$40,000."

This financial 'bottom line' discussion, plus the fact that Hibbert does refer Homer to Dr Nick in the weight-gain consultation described earlier (suggesting that he may be earning some sort of commission by referring patients in this way) reinforces *The Simpsons'* mockery of the marketplace for services that exists in US medical care. Indeed, the show's official website describes jovial Julius thus; "Hibbert has always lent comfort and reassurance, as long as it involved cash up front" (*Character File*, 2004)

Furthermore, despite his competence as a doctor, Dr Hibbert's practice is not entirely ethical. In Episode AABF04, having saved Homer's life with extensive surgery, he is forced to admit: "While we were setting your broken bones and putting your blood back in, we helped ourselves to a kidney and gave it to your father." This is despite Homer's repeated refusal to agree to an organ donation. The questionable morality of Hibbert is more disturbingly revealed in the following exchange from Episode 2F10:

Dr Hibbert: "Congratulations, Mrs Simpson: you're pregnant."

Marge: “Hmm...”

Dr Hibbert: “Am I to take it that this is [chuckles] an unwanted pregnancy?”

Marge: “ Oh no, not exactly...It’s just that I don’t know how we’re going to be able to afford this.”

Dr Hibbert: “Well, you know that a healthy baby can bring upwards of \$60,000.”

Marge: [outraged] “What?!”

Dr Hibbert: “Well, of course, that was just a test. Er, had you reacted differently, you’d be in jail right now. Simply a test” [laughs uncomfortably]

At least Dr Nick makes little effort to hide his (un)ethical stance. Also, bizarrely, given the track record outlined earlier, Dr Nick’s prescriptions are not a complete failure either, indicating perhaps that, like Lionel Hutz, his character is not beyond redemption. For instance, in Episode 3F18, a highly agitated Grampa Simpson bursts into a hospital reception listing a variety of ridiculous symptoms that leave a medical orderly flummoxed. He describes Grampa as “a crazy man” who is “demanding to see a quack”. All (conventional) medical advice fails until Riviera’s clearly nonsensical decision to use “transdermal electromicide” to calm the patient’s “bonus eruptus” works wonders. This seems to indicate an acknowledgment that deluded patients need deluded doctors in order to make sense of their predicaments. Contemporary US society, having largely repudiated the gentleman professional, is thus portrayed as all too susceptible to ‘quackery’. Moreover, like Hutz, Dr Nick’s low fees at least make his ‘skills’ accessible to the less well-off members of this society. Once the Simpsons have accepted that they cannot afford Hibbert’s surgical charges (see above), they notice Riviera’s TV commercial and realise that he is their only alternative: “I’ll perform any operation for \$129.95! ...You’ve tried the best, now try the rest! Call 1-600-DOCTORB. The B is for Bargain!”

Discussion: (Dis)ordering the professions?

There is something particularly interesting about the use of contrast as a cultural structure in *The Simpsons*. The portrayals of Dr Nick (naïve, panicky, outside of the system) compared to Dr Hibbert (mature, unflappable, embedded in medical hierarchy); and the hopeless, 'little-guy' desperation of Lionel Hutz compared to the ruthless, corporate efficiency of The Pasty-Faced Lawyer, provide contradictory representations of both nominally 'descriptive' (medical) and 'normative' (legal) classes of professional. Whilst ridiculing notions of professional authority in general, these representations also serve to deconstruct the dualism between such classifications, showing how individual professionals of every persuasion are caught in the grip of a modern market society. Intriguingly, with their limited power in this society (compared to their more apparently competent counterparts), the depiction of individuals such as Riviera and Hutz is not entirely unsympathetic. For instance, note how Dr Nick's inadequate training at a dubious medical school may well have been all that someone of his ethnic minority status could ever aspire to. Note too how Attorney Hutz at least *has* a personality (flawed though it may be) compared to anonymity of The Pasty-Faced Lawyer, captured in the pathos of his bitter observations of 'Hollywood' lawyers. Note too how access to both these less-than-perfect professionals is available to the mass-market, and cash-poor, consumers of Springfield, consumers who need someone (anyone?) they can trust in making sense of the unsparing regime of capitalism. Riviera's attempts to win compensation for his impoverished clients for 'whiplash' and Hutz's similar moves in bringing law suits against 'all-you-can-eat' restaurants, while misguided, may at least offer the Simpsons family the hope of some financial comfort.

Generally, however, in what Turner (2004) terms a 'leadership vacuum' in the contemporary West, the show suggests that there is no authority left uncorrupted by the relentless forces of corporate greed, and none who seem to have the power to resist. Avarice, whether on the part of the professional or the individual citizen, seemingly reigns supreme. We can see, for example, how even the Springfield medical system will accept the quackery of Dr Nick when attempting to assuage a (presumably fee-paying) Grampa Simpson who responds to nothing else. This partial absorption of Riviera into the professional hierarchy is also shown by Dr Hibbert's referral of Homer to Dr Nick for weight-gaining advice. Hibbert himself, always looking to increase his fees, is most dramatically portrayed as part of the market system when he tentatively offers to broker the sale of Marge's baby. Meanwhile in the legal context, while Lionel Hutz (unconsciously) ponders the precariousness of the notion of 'truth' – which he does on more than one occasion, suggesting some sort of ongoing engagement with the undecidability of professional judgement – the 'highly paid' Pasty-Faced Lawyer's version of this truth is only available to wealthy clients like Mr Burns.

What is most significant from a close reading of *The Simpsons* is how groups/classes of professionals are represented by subtle patterns of dichotomous characterisation. The show reminds us that for every Julius Hibbert there is a Nick Riviera; and for every 'Pasty-Faced Lawyer', there is a Lionel Hutz. These dichotomous conceptual pairings facilitate 'boundary play' which Nippert-Eng (2005: 302) defines as "the visible, imaginative manipulation of shared cultural-cognitive categories for the purpose of amusement". The 'endless workability' of these pairings, to paraphrase Nippert-Eng (2005: 309), allows us to share the sense that the discredited 'expert' is as much a victim as an agent of the professional class system to which s/he aspires. Thus we can see conceptual pairings in *The Simpsons* such as 'professional-unprofessional', 'competent-incompetent', 'legitimised-marginalised', 'powerful-

powerless', 'rich-poor' and arguably even 'bad-good', all of which intertwine to leave a sense of indeterminacy regarding what it means to be a professional actor in the Western market context. These representations show how the power of professionals can never be equal to that of the owners of capital (Boreham, 1983) who may (or may not) require their services. Nevertheless, our sympathies for the relatively powerless, unrecognised (but perhaps, in some small way, virtuous) Riviera and Hutz are stretched, since we cannot avoid the fact that both desperately seek not just professional recognition, but also what might be described as media recognition (viz Nick's appearances on a TV show; Hutz's glee at defending a high-profile murder charge), both try to extend the boundaries of their expertise (in Nick's case to dietician; in Hutz's to real estate salesman) and both resort to the most crass forms of marketing communication. It seems that in pursuing their professional projects, Springfield's professionals are doing little more than drowning in an ocean of their own crapulence, an ocean into which Groening et al. allow the viewer to dip a tentative, risk-free toe.

Given the above, are we able to comment about how the world of the professional is ordered by *The Simpsons*? To paraphrase Rhodes (2001b), I believe that the show's critique plays out the complex and contradictory relations that people may have with the professional roles in which they currently work, and/or (as clients) with the individuals who fill those roles. *The Simpsons* illustrates how, in their attempts to overcome the ontological insecurity of late modernity (Giddens, 1990), professionals legitimise their identities as powerful experts but are also regularly buffeted by the forces of the marketplace and struggle to master relations with the sovereign customer/client. In its representations of professional service workers, the show offers a form of reflective social commentary sensitive to Western market cultures. We are left with a sense that the legal and medical professions, for all their flaws, are made up of fallible and perhaps forgivable human beings.

Ultimately, the oppositional underpinning of organisationally-produced shows like *The Simpsons*, and other counter-cultural representations of organisational life, leaves us feeling both optimistic and pessimistic (Parker, 2006: 13). This seems inevitable since it must, perforce, reflect a culture in which large corporations have become powerful ordering forces. As Parker puts it, “that is why so many of these materials make us laugh, and why the laugh so often catches in our throat”. Through their characterisations the show’s writers appear to be conducting an ideological struggle between tempering the influence of the market’s impersonal mechanisms, yet also acknowledging the market as a means of co-ordination which allows social order to emerge (Thompson et al., 1991). *The Simpsons’* portrayal of the professional is emblematic of this tension, but in a way that is not immediately obvious until approached via a close reading. In the case of professional identity construction, paradigm reinforcement (i.e. the crystallisation of a particular – now seemingly commonplace -- critique) is facilitated by the resonance of the show’s relentlessly satirical representation of the professional project. Paradoxically, contradictions are generated by the occasional, more wryly humorous, depiction of the social order as it affects (and is affected by) the hapless/hopeless, hubris-prone Hutz and Riviera. These contradictions set up a sense of dissonance that enables *The Simpsons* to undermine conventional (largely critical) frames of reference.

Conclusion

Fictional representations of professional service identities in *The Simpsons* thus connect with scholarly representations in a way that enriches our understanding of contemporary organizations. Sociological studies of the professions tend to present a predominantly critical vision of the professional project while the marketing literature

is rather more managerialist in its portrayal of a set of professional workers drawn into a market-based response to attacks on their status. The main contribution of the paper has been to show how, on the one hand, *The Simpsons* to a large degree reflects this academic thinking on the nature of the professional project yet, on the other, offers some rather more ambivalent, even sympathetic, notions of professional identity. This mimetic excess allows us to view markets, organization(s) and our professional(ised) selves in a way that deepens our appreciation of actual and possible organizations and identities.

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