When employment status shapes professionalism. The case of the academic labour market in Switzerland

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Abstract

In the classical sociology of professions literature, professionalism is said to exist when a group of workers achieve a monopoly over a given set of tasks, and determines the manner in which the latter should best be carried out. Within this *task-based* approach, the employment status of professionals is something that is rarely addressed. In this chapter, we argue that an *employment-based* perspective might be a potentially fruitful way of analysing professionalism. It offers the opportunity of moving beyond the study of occupational "boundary work", and of focusing on different forms of occupational segregation and segmentation. Based on the analysis of the recent changes within the Swiss higher education sector, we show how studying the employment conditions of academics in the early stages of their careers provides an original window on the differentiation processes that occur *within* professions. We argue that precarious employment conditions are associated with lower levels of identification with a task-based model of professional identity.

Key words: Academic careers; Employment conditions; Occupational stratification, Precarious labour; Switzerland

1. Introduction

According to the classical sociology of professions (Hughes 1971; Parsons 1939), "professionalism" is understood as a process through which a particular group of workers achieves "monopolistic control" (Forsyth & Danisielwicz 1985, p. 62) over a set of tasks or services. Achieving such a monopoly is the result of a range of actions (Bajard 2015), including the progressive specialization of workers (Strauss 1992), the relegation of certain activities to other – usually subordinate– occupations (Arborio 1995), the combination of previously distinct activities (Abbott 1988), competition with other occupations for an expertise-based jurisdiction over a specific issue, or the claim to a jurisdiction that has temporarily been left vacant (idem.). As Julia Evetts has stressed, professionalism may thus occur either "from within", through the "successful manipulation of the market by a given occupation", or "from above", as a consequence of "forces external to the occupation" (Evetts 2018, p. 45). Independently of the process involved, professionalisation is most commonly defined as "the activity by which the rules governing the exchange of goods and services are made and implemented" (Moran & Wood 1993, p. 17). The sociology of professionalisation and professionalism appears therefore to be mainly *task-based*, exploring how professional groups mobilise "knowledge and expertise" to stake claims with regard to clients, competing professions and the State (Evetts 2008; Saks 2012, 2016). From this perspective, the defining quality of a profession is often reduced to "[its] ability to solve important problems for a clientele that is willing to pay for [...] solutions" (Fogarty 2014, p. 52).

Perhaps because the sociology of professions emerged in North America, where the State does not play a central role in the regulation of professional activities (Demazière & Gadéa 2010; Sapiro 2006), the influence of employment status and working conditions on determining the boundaries of a "professional jurisdiction" (Abbott 1988) or on the monopoly a profession may exercise over a given "bundle of tasks" (Hughes 1971), has rarely been addressed.

This relative lack of research interest in the role of employment status and working conditions may also be due to the fact that these constitute aspects of "ordinary" work, whereas the sociology of professions tradition in the US focused primarily on elite occupations (Evetts 2008). Furthermore, since the sociology of professions usually studies a particular occupation within a given societal context (i.e. what Julia Evetts (2008, p. 525 calls "within-State theorizing"), cross-national variations in the employment conditions of a given occupation have rarely been taken into consideration.

In this chapter, we argue that more attention needs to be paid to how day-to-day services are rewarded, and to the social and legal structures that frame these rewards. In a context where professionals no longer represent an "elite minority" that condenses power and prestige (Haug 1975, p. 201), there has been increasing interest in this aspect of professionalism. Also, in line with the theoretical perspectives that underpin this book, we argue that by focusing on employment and working conditions, rather than on tasks alone, we can enhance our understanding of the differentiation processes that occur *within* and not only *between* professional groups (see Chapter 1 in this volume).

We therefore advocate stepping away from a task-based approach to professionalism, in order to explore the influence of employment status and working conditions on professionalism and professional identity. We focus on the higher education (HE) sector in Switzerland. Academics are traditionally seen as archetypal professionals: they have a monopoly over a well-established "bundle of tasks", they are relatively autonomous in the way they manage their own "jurisdiction", and their legitimacy is based on their expertise and scientific knowledge rather than on tradition. We nevertheless argue that it is difficult to understand what "being an academic" means today without recognising the transformations in the employment conditions currently taking place in the HE sector in most Western countries. Here, we analyse in some depth the challenges faced by academics in the early stages of their careers, and consider the implications of the expansion of

this 'precarious' category of knowledge workers for the 'professionalism' of the academic occupation as a whole. Our analysis is based on the results gleaned from an online survey and interview data with postdocs previously or currently working in a single Swiss university.[1] By analysing how these aspiring professionals see their academic careers, we identify some of the challenges they face and analyse the implications of their experiences for understanding contemporary academic professionalism.

2. Linking micro-level practices and macro-level regulations: for an *employment-based* approach to professionalism

Promoting an *employment-based* approach to professionalism, thereby challenging the traditional *task-based* approach, offers an interesting opportunity to renew and reframe the way that professions and occupations are analysed.

Adopting an employment-based approach to professionalism requires us to consider the contractual arrangements under which professionals carry out their activities, and determine the "material rewards" they obtain for their work and any associated social protection measures or benefits (Kelloway et al. 2004, p. 109). In other words, we need to explore the contractual arrangements that distinguish individuals who otherwise share a similar "bundle of tasks". For example, medical doctors may either work in a salaried or self-employed capacity, in a hospital, clinic or medical practice, and they are likely to receive different levels of pay, recognition and social benefits according to their employment status.

When exploring the idea that employment status and working conditions have a significant impact on academic professionalism, we argue that studying the conditions of a particular occupation enables us to link the micro, meso and macro levels of the analysis. By paying attention to both the legal framework within which professionals offer their services and the compensation they receive for these services, it is possible to develop a sociologically embedded understanding of professional careers and of professionalism. Furthermore, this approach seems to be particularly effective for studying the professionals located at the bottom of the career ladder, who may not have enough power to negotiate the rules that frame professional interactions and the internal division of labour.

As Mike Saks (2016) has stressed, several macro-level studies have already explored the links between "professions and the organizational context in which they operate", providing a "theoretical examination of the nature and role of professions in the wider society" (p. 174). Saks argues that these contributions have often been "underpinned by an abstracted teleological view", rather than by "rigorous evidence-base discussion" or empirical data (idem. p. 174). In this chapter, we look at the case of the academic profession in Switzerland in order to highlight how adopting an employment-based approach offers an interesting opportunity to empirically implement our approach to professionalism.

3. Three task-based profiles of academics: the researcher, the teacher and the manager

Most research about the academic profession has adopted a *task-based* approach. Thus, in most cases, a "bundle of academic tasks" is used to describe the three constitutive activities of the academic profession: teaching, research and administration. The relative weight of each of these tasks, especially that of research and teaching, varies according to socio-historical and economic contexts (Charle & Verger 2012; Gingras 2003). However, since the end of the 20th century in most European and North American countries, academic work has almost always involved a combination of these "bundles of tasks" (Capelleras 2005; Losego 2004; Musselin 2009; Oshagbemi 2000; Bodin et al. 2018).

When comparing academic recruitment processes in France, USA and Germany, Christine Musselin distinguishes between two ideal-types through which academics judge their prospective colleagues: the "research active academic" and the "good citizen academic" (Musselin 2009, pp. 136–139). The first ideal-type profile is defined by an outstanding capacity and ability for research-related tasks. The second profile is defined by commitment to the smooth running of the institution, notably through teaching and supervision.

As an alternative to this binary model, other authors have suggested that administrative and managerial tasks have recently become more central aspects of academic professionalism. Some authors have argued that the "academic manager" is becoming an increasingly important ideal-type in a number of countries (Harley et al. 2004; Henkel 2000), implying a potential conflict with the traditional values of "academic autonomy and collective ideals" (Winter 2009, p. 123). The emergence of this third ideal-type profile of academic professionalism reflects the rise of "accountability" within academic institutions, and results from attempts by appropriately qualified individuals to improve their career prospects (Paye 2015), to maintain their leadership over a research team (Louvel 2010), or to find a "niche" for themselves when research funding opportunities become rare (Gabrysiak 2020).

The relative value attributed to these three profiles varies according to the national and historical context (Kwiek 2015), and the academic discipline (Bodin et al. 2018). However, "research tasks" are usually valued more by the academic

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community, while "service tasks" (teaching, administration, etc.) are often seen as less desirable (Bamber et al. 2021), sometimes to the point of being regarded as a form of "academic housework" (Misra 2012; Heijstra et al. 2016). The way academics navigate between these three types of tasks also depends on their institutional and national contexts. Moreover, the career paths leading to these three ways of "being an academic" are profoundly shaped by gender, race, and other forms of cultural and social capital (O'Meara et al. 2017; Gabrysiak 2020). However, it is presumed that the internal fragmentation and segmentation of the academic profession is adequately described by referring to these three ideal-type profiles, each based on a specific contribution to the overall "bundle of tasks" of academic work. Individuals who correspond to one or another of these three profiles are assumed to benefit from similar (stable) employment status and working conditions.

This unified vision of the academic profession becomes rather more difficult to sustain in a historical context where increasing numbers of academic staff no longer have permanent positions (Bosanquet et al. 2017, p. 890). It would therefore seem legitimate to question to what extent structural changes to employment conditions in HE institutions might have an impact on professional identities and practices.

4. The rise of fixed-term contracts within academic institutions

Historical accounts of the professionalisation of academic work have suggested that between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century, academic careers were mostly based on a two-stage process (Enders & Musselin 2008, p. 134), usually beginning with a period of "academic apprenticeship", characterised by fixed-term positions that provided the basis for selection into the tenured professorships (or their equivalents) that made up the core of the academic profession. Although the relative chances of moving up from a fixed-term to a tenured position vary considerably across countries and disciplines, as did the time required to make this transition, the overall pattern of an academic career was similar in many countries around the world.

However, in the wake of the extensive adoption of new public management (NPM) strategies in academic systems in most western countries (Enders 2001; Ferlie et al. 2008), more diverse recruitment and selection processes have emerged (Enders & Musselin 2008, p. 134). Over the last three decades, the relative share of permanent positions in the academic labour market has dropped, sometimes quite spectacularly. Although the increase in fixed-term positions varies from country to country, the trend has been widely observed (Murgia & Poggio 2019). In the US, for instance, the share of the academic workforce hired on non-tenured contracts rose from 43% in 1975 to 64% in 2003 (Ehrenberg 2006). Likewise, in France, where a relatively short transition phase towards the first level of tenure used to be the norm, the share of permanent positions has sharply decreased since 2004 (Quéré 2012, pp. 312–313). Between 40% and 50% of the academic staff in French universities are now employed on temporary contracts (MESRI 2020). This generalised restructuring of the academic career path can be partly explained by the rise of a "managerial culture" within HE institutions (Enders & Musselin 2008b, p. 135). From this perspective, academic tenure is represented as a risk, since it can: "entrench highly specialized staff whose domains of competence may quickly become irrelevant owing to the rapid transformation of science" (Enders & Musselin 2008, p. 135). In such conditions, "contingent (i.e. non-tenured) positions tend to develop as alternative career tracks, less secure, distinct from the traditional two-stage tracks and with few bridges from one to another" (idem.). Non-tenured academics tend to be excluded from the core of the occupation and may hold a "probationary" status for many years (Le Feuvre et al. 2020). Indeed, fixed-term teaching and research contracts are becoming an increasingly common alternative to tenured positions for many academics in the early (and not so early) stages of their careers.

5. Mapping the experiences of early-career stage academics in the Swiss context

In the following section, we base our analysis on the case of Switzerland, a country where the proportion of fixed-term academic positions has risen sharply over the past twenty years (Bataille et al. 2017; Leemann et al. 2010). We argue that this has changed the ways in which academics view their work, but also their experience of belonging to an HE institution and to the occupation in general and the way they carry out their work.

A vast body of literature has documented the process of academic "proletarisation" (Dearlove 1997; Ellis et al. 2014; Wilson 1991) or of academic deprofessionalisation (Raina 2019; Roberts & Donahue 2000). In line with Marxist critiques of contemporary capitalism (Braverman 1974), these studies have focused on the changes that have occurred in a number of countries since the end of the 1980s, leading to diminished prestige and professional autonomy for academics in general. These structural changes may involve, among other things: "less trust and discretion"; "a strong division of labour", "stronger hierarchies of management control", "greater conflict"; "growing routinisation", "bureaucratisation", "worse conditions and facilities" and a "steep decline in relative pay" for many academics (Wilson 1991, p. 251).

Our line of reasoning differs from this deprofessionalisation perspective. We argue that the rise of destandardised academic employment conditions has created new fault lines within the academic occupation as a whole. On the one hand, there is still a widespread belief that academics benefit from relatively stable resources and recognition, occupying tenured positions and navigating between the ideal-type profiles of the academic "researcher", "teacher" or "manager" (Musselin 2009). On the other hand, we observe a large number of academics in the early stages of their careers who are

employed on fixed-term contracts. Interestingly, in order to maintain their employability over time, these precarious academic workers are unable to specialise in a particular form of academic professionalism, and thus appear to perform a "bundle of tasks" that is quite distinct from those of their tenured counterparts. In other words, job security appears to largely determine the ability of academics to specialise in a specific set of academic tasks over time. In contrast, choosing to specialise in a specific type of academic task appears to be too risky for academics who have yet failed to secure a stable position, since this form of specialisation could significantly limit their future employment opportunities.

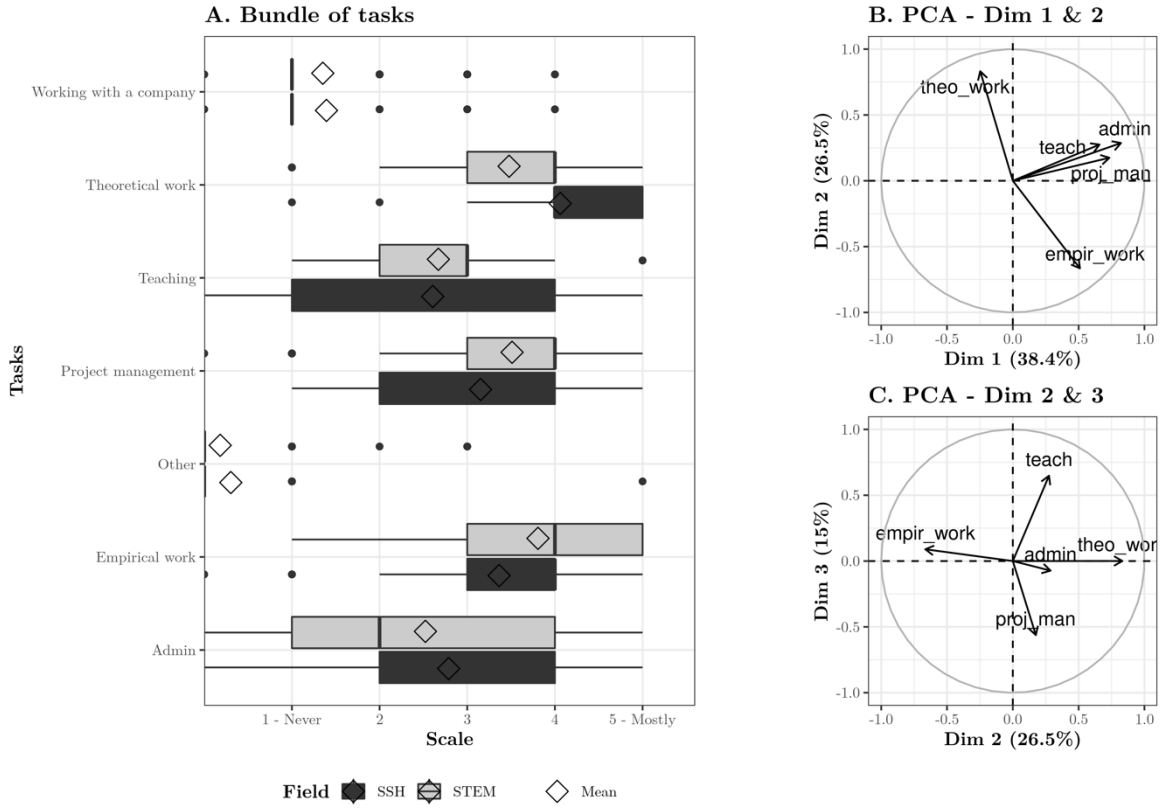
5.1 A diverse "bundle of tasks"

Our analyses are based on data gathered during the GARCIA European research project (2014-2018). This project studied gendered career asymmetries in the early stages of academic careers. Research teams from six countries (Austria, Belgium, Iceland, Italy, Slovenia and Switzerland) gathered qualitative and quantitative data on the working routines and work-life balance strategies of men and women currently in the so-called 'postdoc' phase of their careers (i.e. employed in research and/or teaching and/or project management capacities, following the successful completion of a PhD). For this chapter, we used the quantitative and qualitative data collected in Switzerland. Our target population included all the men and women who had been hired as postdocs in a single Swiss university between 2010 and 2013 (N=406). In 2015, all of them were invited to complete an online survey. About a third of the target group filled out our questionnaire (n=138, resp. rate=34%). This response rate compares favourably with other online surveys in the same field (Shih & Phan 2009). Furthermore, a comparison of the socioeconomic characteristics of our respondents with the HR data of our case-study university revealed no selection bias. The respondents' characteristics broadly mirror those of the target population, at least in terms of age, gender, and disciplinary field.

Our respondents described a variety of employment and working conditions. In 2015, 75% were employed on fixed-term academic (postdoc) contracts, 15% had moved on to permanent academic positions, 8% had left academia altogether, and 2% were unemployed. Since this chapter deals with professionalism, we will focus our analyses on the respondents who had remained in academic employment (n=121). In terms of work experience, 50% of the respondents had defended their theses fewer than six years earlier and 25% seven or more years earlier. About 60% of our respondents were female, 73% were from a science (STEM) background and 37% from a social sciences and humanities (SSH) background. Finally, only 17% of the respondents held permanent or tenured positions.

We asked these postdocs and former postdocs about what their current jobs entailed, and we invited them to use a 5-point scale (from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Mostly") to rank the relative importance of different tasks: ("theoretical work", "empirical work", "cooperation with external private sector partners", "project management", "administration", "teaching", and "other"), in their daily routines. Since their answers were self-reported, the scale allowed us to capture the subjective perception our respondents had about what they did in their work. We were also able to assess the interrelation between "work" and "self" for our respondents and to explore how their work shaped "value and prestige judgments" about themselves and others (Hughes 1966, p.339).

Figure 1. The "bundle of tasks" carried out by early-career stage academics working in a Swiss University



Source: GARCIA Websurvey

The main purpose of our study was to analyse whether or not their employment status had any bearing on the degree to which our respondents reported particular configurations of task specialisation. To this end, we used a model that we had previously used in a study of artistic occupations (Perrenoud & Bataille 2017). We ran a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on the self-estimated weight of each of the above-mentioned daily tasks (Figure 1). Then we visualised where each individual was located on the PCA factorial plan according to different variables: their discipline (STEM or SSH); their employment contract (fixed-term or permanent); their "academic age" (i.e. the number of years since defending their PhD) and their gender (Figure 2).

Figure 1 shows the average "bundle of tasks" (A) observed among our respondents. We also plotted the result of our PCA (B). The more frequently two tasks were mentioned together, the closer the two arrows are on the graph. Here, we only account for the three main dimensions of the PCA, which make up 79.9% of the variance observed.

Figure 1.A shows that the tasks that feature in the daily work routines of postdocs in Switzerland are similar to those observed elsewhere (Capelleras 2005; Oshagbemi 2000; Bodin et al. 2018). On average, research-related tasks ("theoretical work" and "empirical work") are seen as daily core tasks, followed by administrative duties ("project management" and "administration"), all well ahead of teaching. Other kinds of tasks ("working with industry", etc.) are not central to the daily activities of our respondents. The differences in the task distribution for postdocs in the STEM and SSH fields are relatively small.

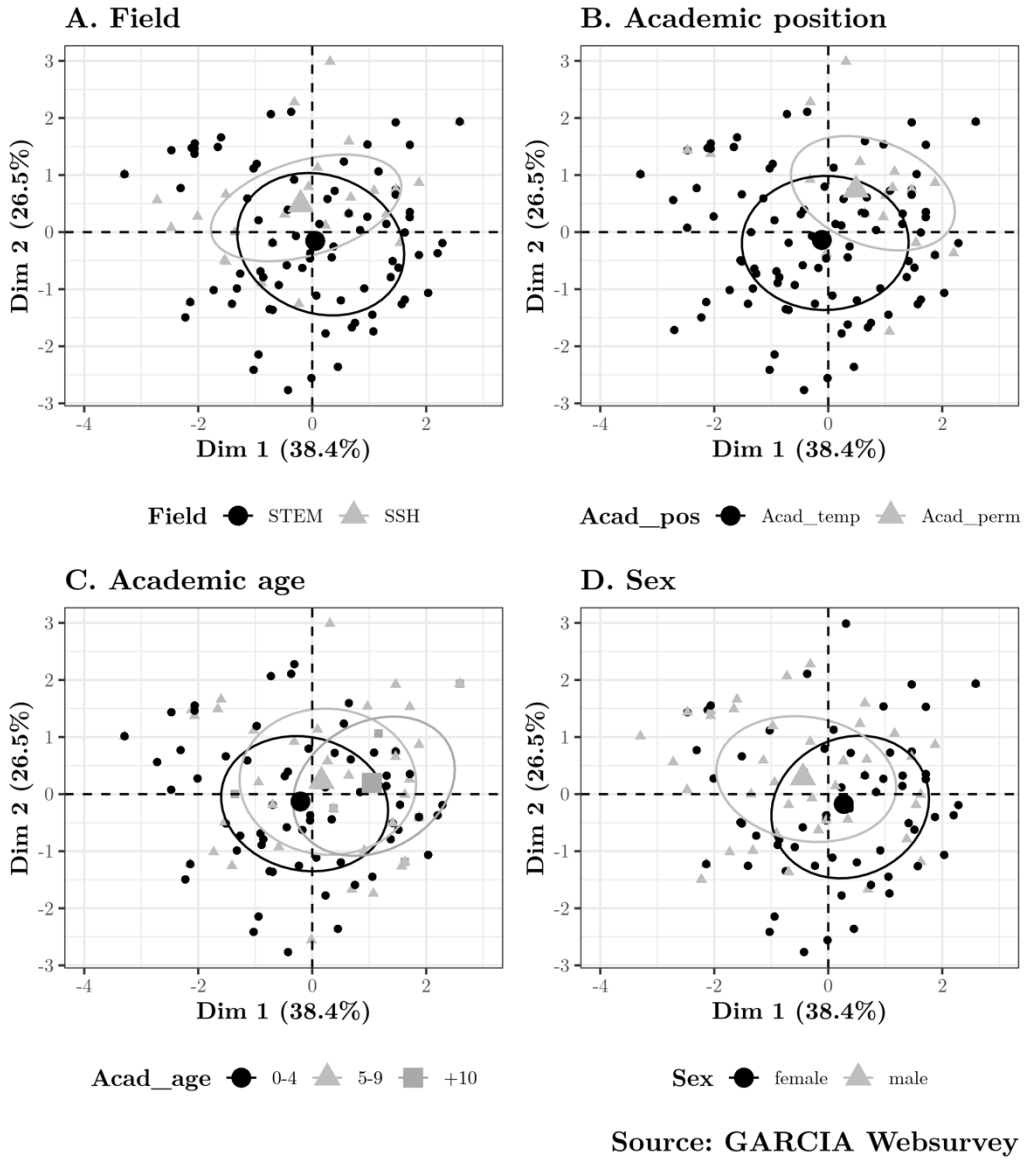
According to our PCA (Figure 1.B), the main difference among our respondents (Dim 1) is between those who claim that their work routine corresponds to the traditional distribution between the three types of tasks performed by academics (i.e. research, teaching and management), and those who do not feel specialised at all. Thus, on the PCA factorial plan plotted in Figure 1.B, the left part of the diagram is almost entirely blank. The second dimension (Dim 2) divides our respondents according to two research-related tasks: those who state that their time is mostly invested in empirical work and those who feel more focused on theoretical work. Figure 1.C shows that the third dimension (Dim 3) opposes a "teaching" profile to a more "administrative" one. Overall, the three ideal-typical academic profiles (i.e. research, teaching and management) can be traced with the 2nd and 3rd dimensions of our PCA.

5.2 The importance of employment status

Figure 2 represents the individuals on the 1st (horizontal axis) and 2nd (vertical axis) dimensions of our PCA. The median ellipses represent the areas where at least 50% of the individuals presenting one of the characteristics are located. For instance, our SSH respondents tend to be located near the "empirical research" pole less frequently than their STEM counterparts (Figure 2.A), since the SHS ellipse (in grey) is located towards the top of the graph. The STEM specialists (in black) are more evenly spread across the whole surface. Figure 2.D shows that women (in black) are also slightly more

likely to be located near the "empirical research" pole than men. However, gender is not as important as we had expected for the distribution of our respondents between the different types of tasks. For example, we did not identify a clear specialisation of women in the traditionally undervalued teaching activities. At this early stage in academic careers, gender differences only appear important when other factors, such as parental status, are taken into consideration (Le Feuvre et al. 2018).

Figure 2. Scatterplot & clouds of early-career stage academics working in a Swiss University



Source: GARCIA Websurvey

Regarding the postdocs' level of investment in one or several specific tasks (i.e. the position on the first axis), academic age is clearly a relevant variable (Figure 2.C): a higher declared involvement in specific types of academic tasks is more common among respondents who had defended their PhD over ten years previously (dark grey). Our (academically) younger respondents (i.e. those who had defended their PhD fewer than nine years earlier and in particular, fewer than five years earlier) did not identify any particular set of tasks that are central to their daily routines. They are thus more often located on the left-hand side of the axis, with other respondents who do not feel specialised in any way. Nevertheless, the ellipses do overlap to a large extent. It is the nature of the academic position occupied (fixed-term or permanent) that appears to determine the localisation of our respondents, rather than academic age *per se* (Figure 2.B). Those who have a tenured academic position (in grey) are all located on the right-hand side of the graph. Respondents who were still in fixed-term positions at the time of the survey are more evenly spread across the whole of the surface.

These results suggest that self-identification with a specific bundle of academic tasks is linked with occupying a stable academic position. The majority of our respondents who had stable academic positions identified a particular group of core tasks, whereas those on fixed-term contracts did not identify a similar set of core tasks. This can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it could be that, although postdocs have specific job descriptions (managing new research projects, supervising graduate students, etc.), they often end up doing additional tasks. Since they are obviously at pains

to remain on good terms with their supervisors on whom they depend to renew their employment contracts (Le Feuvre et al. 2020), refusing to do the extra work is not an option. On the other hand, and perhaps on a more subjective level, non-tenured academics often experience a fragmented workload (Bataille 2016). This feeling is compounded by the need to enhance their publication record and develop their networks in order to maintain or improve their future chances of employment (i.e. employability), in addition to fulfilling their current contractual obligations.

In both cases, the impression of having a fragmented workload often led our respondents to question the meaning of their work and the high price they felt they were required to pay in order to simply "stay in the system". It thus appears that the lack of self-identification with a specific set of tasks and the inability to cultivate a profile in line with one of the historical forms of academic professionalism is a direct consequence of the precarious employment conditions of our respondents.

6. Conclusion

Our results suggest that changes in employment conditions have eroded the prevalence and significance of the traditional ideal-type task-based profiles for academics currently in the early stages of their careers, leading to the emergence of new fault lines within the profession. Indeed, there appears to be a clear distinction between those who can identify with a particular "bundle of tasks" and those who are required to "fill the gaps" in order to remain in the academic labour market.

As we show here and elsewhere (Le Feuvre et al. 2020), recent structural changes to employment conditions within HE institutions raise serious questions about academic professional boundaries and about academic professionalism as a whole. An oversimplified use of categories such as "early career researcher" or even "postdoc" when speaking about non-tenured academics can lead to the erroneous idea that people employed on fixed-term contracts are only temporarily located on the margins of the occupational group, and that in due time they will be admitted to more central and permanent positions. In reality, the growth of fixed-term positions and the fact that a large number of core academic tasks are being permanently handled by a succession of highly qualified people employed on a temporary basis suggests the need to revisit some of the broadly held views about the academic profession and academic professionalism as a whole. In short, the time has perhaps come to question whether permanent or tenured academic positions should still be considered as the norm and as the basis of academic professionalism. We suggest that fixed-term positions now represent an alternative academic career path, rather than merely representing an "early stage" in academic careers, through which individuals are destined to transition before eventually specialising in research, teaching or management. Considering non-permanent academics as professionals to much the same extent as their tenured colleagues would require the development of innovative analytical tools that could monitor emergent forms of fragmentation and internal segmentation *within* the academic labour market.

The employment-based analysis developed here provides an innovative way to study the differentiation processes occurring *within* professions. Firstly, shifting the approach towards employment and working conditions enables us to move beyond the study of "boundary work" and to focus on diverse forms of occupational segregation and segmentation. Secondly, understanding how "being a professional" is framed jointly by contractual arrangements and by employment conditions allows us to focus on the interaction between processes at work at the macro, meso and micro levels of society. Far from invalidating traditional analyses of professionalism, we suggest that this approach could foster more productive and insightful dialogue between different branches of the academic literature on employment, work, organisations and professionalism that are still too often considered separately rather than in combination.

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