

The making of professors: Assessment and recognition in academic recruitment

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Abstract

How do academics become professors? This paper considers the making of ‘professor’ as a subject position through which academics are acknowledged in both organizational contexts and disciplinary fields. The paper examines social processes of recognition in 145 appointment procedures for professorships in the discipline of history at sixteen German universities between 1950 and 1985. Based on an analysis of over 1500 documents from archived appointment records, I investigate how academics are acknowledged as professorial in appointment procedures. The procedures invoked both (1) processes of judgement, in which worth and qualities are attributed to candidates, and (2) processes of legitimation, in which said judgements are stabilized and made acceptable. Using insights from the sociology of valuation and evaluation, this paper sheds light on the fundamental processes of recognition and valorization in academia. The findings contribute to the sociology of scientific knowledge and science and technology studies, which have concentrated on academic recognition in the realm of research, but paid less attention to such recognition in organizational contexts. Complementing this literature, the paper allows for a more general understanding of ‘professor’ as a focal academic subject position.

Keywords

evaluation, Germany, judgement, legitimation, positioning, professors

Introduction

How do academics become professors? This question may seem trivial at first. Although hiring procedures differ between national higher education systems, most systems require academics to move through a series of distinct career stages, beginning with earning a PhD. During the process, academics are socialized into their respective communities, developing skills and collecting performance markers in teaching, research,

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administration, and other areas. But how does an academic actually become a subject who is acknowledged by their peers as professorial? In the current paper, I examine this social process of recognition and propose that scholars should conceive of ‘professor’ as not only an organizational status position but also a subject position.

Academics occupy a wide variety of academic subject positions. They are acknowledged as authors in their publications, seen as researchers in laboratories and libraries, addressed as teachers in classrooms, and encounter each other as colleagues at conferences and in the hallways of their departments. Thus, to claim their space in the social realm of academia, academics must juggle a variety of subject positions. However, within the sociology of science, studies of the various ways in which academics are acknowledged have concentrated almost entirely on the positions of researcher and author. In this analysis, I extend the extant literature by exploring the other subject positions that academics occupy. The position of professor intertwines both organizational and thematic realms of research because it combines the expectations, rights, and duties of both scholarly communities and academic institutions. By examining the making of professors – or, in other words, exploring how academics become acknowledged and valorized as being professorial – this paper facilitates an understanding of the professorial subject position and provides insights into fundamental processes of recognition and valorization in academia (cf. Angermüller, 2017; Lamont, 1987).

I illustrate the social process of making professors, and some of the main changes this process has undergone, by analysing archived records of 145 professorial appointment procedures for professorships in the field of history at sixteen German universities from 1950 to 1985. This archival material reflects the particularities of appointing history professors in the German higher education system in the second half of the 20th century. As such, this analysis is situated within a specific period and a specific national arrangement of career structures, procedures and regulations. However, even today, appointment procedures are an important site for the making of German professors. Whether it is their first professorial appointment or whether they have already been appointed as a professor elsewhere, any appointment is highly symbolic. To identify the most suitable candidate for a professorship, appointment procedures invoke multiple academic subject positions by assessing candidates as researchers, teachers, and colleagues. For example, a candidate might be simultaneously acknowledged as an expert on modern French history, a cooperative colleague, and a mediocre supervisor of students. To unravel these processes of recognition and valorization, I distinguish between the forms of judgement embedded in appointment procedures and the factors that contribute to the legitimation of these judgements. The procedural choreography that frames the interplay of judgements and legitimations produces a chosen candidate who occupies the subject position of professor and who is acknowledged as *a professorial someone*, that is, a person upon whom a set of professorial qualities, accountabilities, rights, and duties is conferred.

In contrast to subject positions such as researcher and author, which vary systematically across scientific communities and disciplines but not across national higher education systems, the subject position professor is specific to higher education systems. Each national system recruits professors in its own unique way, endowing them with a distinct set of rights and duties, and applying different expectations and accountabilities (cf. Angermüller, 2017; Fumasoli and Goastellec, 2015). As I show in the following sections, in Germany,

the position of professor is ascribed a relatively high level of autonomy, and professorial recruitment is a rather political and symbolic act compared to other systems (cf. Musselin, 2010). While current trends may suggest a global convergence of higher education systems (cf. Enders and De Weert, 2009), these processes of convergence are almost impossible to comprehend without understanding specific national particularities and their historical development. The current paper contributes to the scholarly understanding of this context by shedding light on the subject position of the German professor.

How academics become a professorial someone: Assessment and recognition

The social world of academics is populated by many types of people, including researchers and teachers, authors and deans, supervisors and mentors, professors and PhD students, and many more. Academics usually occupy several of these subject positions at once. In their everyday lives, academics must juggle these various positions – interpreting each one and making it their own – as well as the diverse expectations, rights, duties and accountabilities that are attributed to the positions (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Because subject positions locate their holders within the academic social order, an academic must occupy positions to be acknowledged as a fully-fledged academic persona with a (more or less coherent) academic identity (Angermuller, 2013, 2017). Of course, subject positions can incorporate both academic and non-academic attributions, for example, ‘conservative theorist’, ‘Spanish social scientist’, or ‘female ethnographer’.

Research in Science and Technology Studies (STS) has tended to focus less on the recognition of subject positions and more on their erasure. Laboratory studies reveal how, in certain fields, the individual researcher merges into a unit that functions as a collective epistemic subject (Knorr Cetina, 1999). Published results tend to delete anything subjective and individual from the equation. If a position such as author appears at all, it is as a neutral medium that passes on statements that were produced by nature (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Shapin and Schaffer, 2011). The epistemic agency that is normally attributed to scientific personas is redeployed into a network of objects and technologies (Mialet, 1999). Subject positions may even be seen as embedded in configurations that blur any clear distinction between subjects and objects (Haraway, 1991).

While many recent STS scholars have emphasised the decomposition and erasure of subject positions,¹ sociologists of science have tended to be interested in how subject positions are invoked and produced.² A fair amount of effort is needed for an individual to *become* a researcher, for example, to become recognized as ‘the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty’ (cf. Angermuller, 2013; Gross, 2002). Likewise, the way an author position, for example, ‘Derrida’, is established depends on the intellectual, cultural, and institutional contexts in which an author’s texts are received (Lamont, 1987). The literature shows that very different properties can be attributed to the subject positions researcher and author, ranging from authorship claims to intellectual responsibilities to epistemic agency. It is through these attributions that individual academics are acknowledged and positioned in the academic social order, a consequential process because different degrees and forms of academic recognition signify the authentication of an academic persona and her knowledge, and thus influence the accumulation of resources and power (cf. Bourdieu, 1988).

Although focusing on different social processes, the two (rather schematized) perspectives of STS and sociology of science offer crucial insights into subject positions and their role in academic recognition. Yet these literatures are limited in that the positions they study describe only one dimension of academic life – research – even though academics are not merely epistemic beings who make intellectual claims. Few studies acknowledge other essential subject positions in the academic social order. Yet academics meet as colleagues in the hallways of their departments and at conferences, they face expectations as supervisors and teachers, and they have organizational rights and duties as professors and deans. These positions may exert just as much influence over the academic social order, but scholars know little about how they are produced and used.

Academic conferences illustrate the variety of subject positions in academia. At conferences, academics meet not only as researchers who represent intellectual claims, but also as colleagues. In doing so, they attribute not only intellectual statements, but also social identities and roles to one another. For example, academics try to discern whether the discussant of their paper is in a friendly mood. They decide whether to talk to a colleague about sports or whether politics would be a better topic of conversation, and they establish who is approachable and would provide enjoyable company at the conference dinner (Henderson, 2015; Skelton, 1997). Yet while these interactions are undoubtedly important aspects of the social world of academia, conferences are still sites at which academics are valorized according to intellectual claims. In fact, conferences are an important site for authors to pitch their papers and develop ideas (Gross and Fleming, 2011; Söderqvist and Silverstein, 1994). This dual nature of conferences shows that different subject positions are empirically intertwined, and the distinction between them is analytical.

In addition to researcher, author and colleague, professor is another significant subject position in the social world of academia. I conceptualize ‘professor’ as going beyond the organizational status positions that academics occupy throughout their careers (Hermanowicz, 2007, 2009). Rather, the subject position of professor is essential to the configuration of specific organizational expectations, rights, and duties. Academics who occupy professorial subject positions are recognized and valorized according to these attributions (Angermuller, 2017). Being recognized as a professor allows academics to negotiate an appropriate salary, supervise doctoral students, and assume administrative roles on committees and panels. Thus, the position of professor is of crucial importance for the academic social order as well as for the accumulation of resources and power.

The acknowledgement of academics as *professorial someones* does not occur in publications and laboratories, and rarely at conferences. Rather, appointment procedures are very important sites for the acknowledgement of academics as professorial. In the German higher education system, appointment procedures are particularly meaningful because they are highly symbolic and political. Thus, as I explain in more detail in the following section, the appointment of German professors is not only a bureaucratic procedure in which a status position is filled, but also a symbolic act of acknowledging someone as professorial.

The sociological literature on professorial appointments concentrates on a range of topics, including the disciplinary differences and national traditions that influence the recruitment of professors (Fumasoli and Goastellec, 2015; Musselin, 2010), the factors

and evaluative criteria that influence professorial recruitment, for example, productivity (in the form of publications) or gender (Lutter and Schröder, 2014; Nielsen, 2016), and on departmental power struggles, in which gender inequalities are produced via gendered evaluation practices (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). But research overlooks how professorial appointment procedures acknowledge a chosen candidate as professorial and turn her into a *professorial someone*.

The analytical toolkit on which I draw for this study borrows from the sociology of valuation and evaluation. This literature provides heuristic tools for the analysis of social processes in which worth and value is attributed, and in which meanings are produced, legitimated and institutionalized (Lamont, 2012). Literature on academic evaluation shows how the valorization of academics contributes to their recognition, for example, when prospective graduate students or deceased professors are assessed based on different conceptions of merit (Hamann, 2016; Posselt, 2016; Tsay et al., 2003). Further, this literature shows that in appointment procedures, candidates are constructed in an interplay of the two attributive dimensions of excellence and gender (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). While the core strands of the sociology of valuation and evaluation literature pursue the pragmatic questions of how evaluators actually define and agree on crucial criteria and make common decisions (Berthoin Antal et al., 2015; Lamont, 2012), the current paper complements this scholarship by drawing attention to the effects of evaluation, asking how social processes of recognition and valorization contribute to the subject position of professor.

The German ‘professor’ – a subject position in context

Professors are appointed in decidedly national arrangements comprising of specific academic career structures, procedures, and regulations. Compared with other national systems, the German higher education system is characterized by a relatively homogeneous set of research universities, which have become more competitive since the 1990s (cf. Whitley and Gläser, 2007). Within this system, ‘professor’ is a powerful position. In contrast to department-college systems in some other countries, the chair-faculty system in Germany allows full professors a high degree of autonomy that is not restricted by a strong institutional leadership or administration. Rather, the autonomy of the professor is traditionally combined with state control exerted through bureaucracy. Only recently, after the historical period included in this study, has there been a turn toward market-oriented governance (Schimank, 2005).

From these characteristics of the German higher education system follow a number of particularities for the current case (cf. Musselin, 2010). The comparatively strong control that the sixteen German states [*Länder*] exert on higher education institutions makes the appointment of professors (quite literally) a political issue. Although shortlists are compiled by appointment committees composed primarily of full professors, appointments have traditionally been overseen by the states, with final hiring decisions about professors made by a state minister. Depending on the respective state, this could be, for example, the Minister of Culture. This strong state control administered via bureaucracy was introduced in the 19th century to counter the collegial autonomy of professorial self-recruitment and to prevent nepotism (cf. Rüegg, 2004). Reforms were

enacted in 2001, and it was only after the historical period that is the focus of this analysis that state ministries transferred their influence over appointments to university administrations and that universities were granted more autonomy in their hiring policies. However, German full professors are still civil servants and their salaries are paid by one of the states. Because of the political nature of the hiring process for professors, appointments are not only a formal procedure of filling a status position but also a symbolic act of recognition.

The position of professor enjoys a particularly high level of autonomy in the German system. Almost all full professors – and only full professors – have tenured positions. In the compartmentalized structure of the German chair system, each full professor, or chair holder, has complete authority over their own academic dominion. Research and teaching are organized in small units that revolve around the holder of the chair. Across all disciplines, full professors direct the research activities of their research staff and make unilateral decisions about appointing PhD students and hiring postdocs, who are directly subordinate to a professor (cf. Enders, 2001). The close relationships between students, researchers and their professors, which often takes the form of schools of thought that can be traced across several generations, is especially pronounced in the field of history (cf. Geison and Holmes, 1993; Weber, 1984). As a result of the chair system, the average age for first professorial appointment is relatively high (41 years) in Germany and only 15 percent of academic staff at German universities are tenured (Höhle and Teichler, 2016). Thus, the research staff in a department, which is an association of chairs, has a pyramid-like structure in which power and prestige are concentrated at the top. Because such extensive autonomy is ascribed to the subject position of professor, appointments are far-reaching decisions that go beyond simply filling an organizational status position. Indeed, professorial appointments have an enduring impact on both a department's scholarly orientation and its social environment, including which PhD students and postdocs join the department.

Methodology

My approach attempts to produce a nuanced understanding of the procedural choreography in which a chosen candidate is acknowledged as professorial. Previous studies of academic hiring have provided important insights based either on statistical analyses (Lutter and Schröder, 2014; Nielsen, 2016) or interviews with participants (Fumasoli and Goastellec, 2015; Musselin, 2010; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). The present paper takes a different approach. By exploring the recognition and valorization of candidates across the procedural steps of professorial appointments, I study a hitherto under-examined aspect of the making of professors. This article draws on a corpus of over 1,500 archived documents from 145 appointment procedures that occurred between 1950 and 1985 at sixteen German universities in the discipline of history. Access was requested from archives at 30 universities; fourteen university archives either were not in possession of appointment records or denied access because they deemed that the retention period of the respective records had not ended. Due to German laws regarding data privacy, I was not able to access archival records from the most recent 30 years. However, some of the main features that continue to characterize

professorial appointment procedures were introduced in the 1950s and became routine in the 1960s. I emphasize some of the main changes that professorial appointments underwent throughout the temporal period of this study, and, where appropriate, I highlight differences from today's appointment procedures.

The archival documents include job advertisements, cover letters, *curricula vitae* (CVs), publication lists, reviews and laudations in which committees justify their selection of shortlisted candidates for subsequent decision-making bodies within the university. I used a sampling process that focused on covering appointments which varied on specific key features that might influence professorial hiring (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967). First, the sample includes appointments at both traditional and newly established universities, because universities established during the educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s might apply different recruitment strategies than older universities. Second, the sample includes appointments at both larger and smaller departments, in case department size influences expectations for professorial candidates. Finally, the sample includes appointment procedures that vary with regard to the number of candidates involved (from a handful to dozens; the latter type was prevalent in the later stages of the educational expansion), the age or experience level of those appointed, and the length of the process (from a few months to three years, including some procedures that required several attempts before a candidate was appointed). The sample thus encompasses key distinctions that are likely to influence the process of professorial appointments. The current analysis does not analyse the effects of these distinctions systematically, but rather concentrates on overarching aspects that apply regardless of the age of the university, the size of the department, and the career stage of the candidates.

The analysis was anchored in a grounded theory perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which emphasizes iterative data analysis and the inductive generation of theoretical concepts. This approach, which is based on multiple rounds of coding, allowed me to identify the main processes through which the chosen candidates were acknowledged as professorial. In a first phase of open coding, I categorized data according to content to identify prevalent themes. Several recurring codes referring to the social processes of recognition and valorization emerged in this initial step. In a second round of coding, going back between data and analysis, I related and interconnected codes to form more precise and distinct categories until prevalent patterns coalesced and no new subthemes could be found.

My methodological approach goes beyond determining what archived records actually prove. Rather than conceiving of archival documents as mere containers for meaning that is produced elsewhere, and thus implying that records never document 'what actually happened' (Trace, 2002), I propose that the source material is analytically relevant in its own right (Prior, 2008) because it has a performative dimension within the organizational setting of the university (Cooren, 2004). While archived records only provide information that was considered appropriate for archiving, this bureaucratic front stage nonetheless offers fruitful analytical opportunities. Together, job advertisements, application documents, reviews, and laudations on the candidates perform an official and legitimate version of an appointment procedure. This official version is highly relevant to the symbolic processes of recognition and valorization that constitute the subject position of professor.

Judging candidates and legitimizing judgements

Since the late 1950s, appointment procedures for German professors in all disciplines have begun with the nomination of an appointment committee that consists primarily of professors from the department, but also includes a few individuals from outside the department. The appointment committee drafts a job advertisement and examines the incoming applications. The number of applications varies from the low double-digits to over 100. Applications include, at a minimum, a cover letter, a CV, and a publication list. Based on the applications, and occasionally on a reading of the applicants' key publications, the committee invites approximately five to ten candidates for job interviews, which are complemented by external reviews solicited by the committee. The candidates' applications and publications, the committee's personal impressions from the interviews, and the external reviews represent different sources of information that the committee uses to compile a shortlist of, typically, two or three candidates. The committee submits the shortlist, as well as a laudation explaining and justifying its choices, to decision-making bodies at the university, namely the faculty council, the university senate and the president or rector of the university. The social processes that acknowledge a chosen candidate as professorial occur throughout this procedural choreography. I distinguish between two types of social processes that are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined (Lamont, 2012): processes of judgement, in which worth and qualities are attributed to candidates, and processes of legitimation, in which said judgements are stabilized and made acceptable.

Judging candidates

For candidates to be acknowledged as professors, they must pass multiple forms of judgement. The most prevalent forms of judgement in the sample focus on scholarly, formal, and organizational criteria.

Scholarly judgements

Scholarly judgements of candidates are omnipresent in the sample. While today's evaluations of scholarly performance often focus on metrics (Fumasoli and Goastellec, 2015; Hammarfelt and Rushforth, 2017), quantifiable criteria were not central in the historical period studied here. Committees and reviewers in the sample drew on criteria quite different than those used today for the scholarly judgement of candidates.

One scholarly criterion prevalent in the sample is the thoroughness and soundness of the candidates' research. For example, one committee's 1973 laudation stated that a candidate's publications 'reveal careful methodological reflection and strict study of texts', and praised her 'comprehensive book that is based on a wealth of historical sources'.³ A 1958 committee commended a candidate for his exhaustive research by noting that his book was 'thoroughly worked through', while his work in general was 'characterized by clarity and meticulousness'. A 1954 reviewer was impressed by a candidate's ability 'to ground his reasoning not only on an accumulation and compilation of sources, but ... to always track down the one meaningful source'. A conspicuous focus of scholarly

judgement on an almost craft-like thoroughness and rigour, paired with a remarkable neglect of theoretical accomplishments, is likely a feature of the discipline of history in the German context (cf. Becher, 1981; Iggers, 1984). Notably, over the duration of the historical period of this study, scholarly judgements of candidates' research became increasingly based on their publications, as shown by more extensive discussions of the content of publications, the reception of publications in the field, and the number of publications. Presumably, these references to a candidate's publications serve to bolster scholarly judgements.

The scholarly judgement of candidates was based on more than their research. Another important criterion was the candidates' standing in relation to their cohort in their field. For example, one 1968 committee described a candidate as 'one of the most outstanding talents among young German historians'. In 1972, a reviewer related a candidate to his cohort via a claim that the candidate's talents 'are, to my mind, still rare in our field, which elevates [the candidate] above the standard'. In 1971, another reviewer described a candidate's standing by stating that he 'belongs, without doubt, to the most prolific representatives of the younger generation'. These examples show that scholarly judgements of candidates' research and their standing in the field were crucial criteria for determining whether a candidate was professorial. Although the subject position of professor is embedded in the organizational contexts of a department and a university, prospective occupants of the position were evaluated according to their scholarly qualities and acknowledged as part of a cohort and a scientific community.

Formal judgements

While scholarly judgements of candidates are ubiquitous in the appointment procedures included in this study, they rely on an essential previous condition, namely the formal judgement of candidates. Ambiguous scholarly criteria such as 'standing among the cohort' or 'thoroughness of research' can only be meaningfully applied if the candidates involved in an appointment procedure form a largely homogeneous group according to their scholarly credentials (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The homogenization of candidates according to formal qualifications is a crucial first step in any appointment procedure because appointment committees usually review multiple applications for each open position. The sample application documents show that this challenge became more difficult across the period of study. The sample includes an average of six applications per appointment procedure for the first decade in the period of study (1950–1960) and an average of thirteen applications per procedure for the last decade (1975–1985).⁴ The increasing number of applicants might be explained by the educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s, which not only brought new positions, including professorships, but also, and perhaps more importantly, opened the field somewhat.

Facing a number of applicants with potentially divergent profiles, committees sort the applications by categorizing candidates according to their formal qualifications. In Germany, the crucial formal criterion for any applicant to a professorship is the *Habilitation*. Traditionally, the core of the *Habilitation* is a second book. One 1977 reviewer in the sample reminded the committee that 'any university is well advised to apply formal criteria of qualification ... in a first step. I mention this right away because

several candidates in the final selection are habilitated, while others have not yet completed this examination procedure'. The significance of formal criteria is highlighted by cases in which candidates lacked certain formal qualifications. For example, a 1982 laudation stated that although a candidate was qualified for the position, 'the fact that his *Habilitation* has not yet been published and that his other publications cannot sufficiently make up for this, results in [the candidate] being named only on the third position of the shortlist'. Unless all participants in an appointment procedure offered explicit arguments as to why the lack of a *Habilitation* was not problematic, it was a disadvantage for the candidate. In one case, a 1977 reviewer argued that, 'with respect to formal criteria of qualification, I want to highlight that the research of both [candidates] has to be considered as equivalent to the completed *Habilitations* of other candidates'.

The importance of formal qualifications is indicated not only by these quotes, but also by the fact that most of the archived documents – from CVs to external reviews to laudations – repeatedly state the time and place of the doctorate and the *Habilitation* of a candidate in a sober fashion, as if to reify the formal qualification throughout the procedure. The references to formal, certified qualifications highlight a difference between the position of professor and other less formal academic subject positions, such as that of the researcher. The *Habilitation* is a crucial formal criterion for academics to be acknowledged as a *professorial someone*. Applying this criterion allows the committee to exclude applicants who are not formally qualified and to establish a common degree of qualification among the candidates.

Organizational judgements

A comparison to the other subject positions of researcher and colleague makes it clear that the position of professor is embedded in a specific organizational context, which leads to the prevalence of a third form of judgement: organizational judgement. Candidates were often judged according to the local conditions and interests of the specific department awarding the professorship. For example, the archival records show that, during the educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s, the rising teaching loads and administrative duties that accompanied this expansion influenced the selection of a new colleague. In today's climate of selective and competitive funding (Paradeise et al., 2009), the ability to attract third-party funding and a willingness to cooperate in research clusters are highly sought-after qualities. In fact, references to research funding organizations increased markedly in the source documents across the period of study. Further, in current appointment procedures, organizational judgement is likely influenced by today's more explicit competition between universities for coveted researchers (the university as an organizational actor is described in Krücken and Meier, 2006).

A typical example of organizational judgement is a 1956 laudation that anticipated the local requirements of the respective organizational context when the authors conclude that the candidate 'has proven himself multiple times in administrative and organizational matters; nobody could cope better with the demands of a big subject at a large university'. In another laudation in the same year, a committee argued that the goal of the appointment procedure is to attract a personality that exhibits 'not only ... substantial scholarly achievements, but also the ability to support the existing chair holders in

accomplishing the instructional and organizational tasks in our overcrowded subject'. Such considerations are to be expected in a discipline like history, which attracts many students. Even though external reviewers usually have little insight into the organizational concerns of the appointing department and university, the sample reviewers sometimes tried to anticipate specific organizational requirements in their reviews. For example, one reviewer wrote in 1970 that the department would 'attract a first-rate colleague with considerable teaching experience'. A 1972 reviewer emphasized a candidate's 'pedagogical abilities [which] ensure that he can represent his subject not only in research, but also in teaching'. While references to the candidates' teaching ability remained constant throughout the historical period studied here, candidates' administrative abilities (e.g. experience serving as a dean) became increasingly important over time.

Organizational judgements concern not only matters of teaching and administration but also research. Ideally, a candidate's scholarly work should not only conform to the core themes outlined in the job advertisement but also fit the organizational context by complementing the scholarship already being conducted in the department. One laudation in 1971, for example, stated that the candidate was 'only fourth on the shortlist because his line of research might be a bit remote for the department'. Another, in 1979, judged a candidate's research profile against the scholarly backdrop of the department, concluding that the candidate 'fits well into the faculty's orientation with his connection of historiographical, economic and sociological knowledge'. Occasionally, even reviewers from outside the department judged a candidate's research through the lens of specific organizational concerns. One reviewer wrote in 1974, 'It is a specific criterion that [the candidates'] research profile should be particularly broad because of the small number of teaching personnel at [the university]'. In another case, a 1981 reviewer who judged two candidates to be equal suggested that 'for any further decision, the question of who would be the most sensible addition to the other chair at the department could tip the balance'.

The sample reveals one additional focus of organizational judgement. Occasionally, a chair at a department has a specific intellectual tradition because its previous occupant was a distinguished scholar in a specific research area. Professorial appointments for this type of chair are particularly consequential because the candidates are explicitly viewed as potential successors to a prominent predecessor. In these cases, committee members and reviewers frequently referred to the appointment procedure as 'the succession of [name of preceding professor]'. These institutional ancestral lines can form a backdrop against which candidates are judged. Several of the sample laudations suggested that, in such cases, it is an advantage if a candidate 'has already been the intermediary substitute for two semesters after [the predecessor's] retirement' (1965). These judgements also consider whether a candidate measures up to the academic significance and responsibility that accompanies the succession of a particularly prestigious scholar. For example, one 1970 laudation concluded that 'there is no doubt that [the candidate] can successfully fill out the chair that has previously been held by [a famous predecessor] and [another famous predecessor]'. The essential role of institutional ancestral lines for organizational judgement is likely a particularity of the discipline of history in the German context, where research schools are traditionally important.

It is worth reflecting on the timing of the scholarly, formal and organizational judgements that reviewers and committees use to acknowledge a chosen candidate. Formal judgements, which establish the qualification of candidates via their *Habilitation* or equivalent work, are the first steps in any appointment procedure and thus serve as an entry condition that candidates must meet to be included in the appointment procedure. However, while formal judgements occur at the beginning of appointment procedures, the time and place of the *Habilitation* are constantly restated throughout the duration of the procedure.

Scholarly judgements, which consider, for example, the candidate's standing in their cohort or the thoroughness of their research, occur primarily after the formal judgement. While many of the sample documents focus on scholarly evaluation, the external reviews solicited from peers in the respective research field are particularly geared toward the assessment of the candidate's scholarly qualities. Appointment committees always go beyond scholarly evaluation in the narrow sense and consider the specific organizational demands of their department, but the peers who are invited to review candidates are expected to provide a generalized view of the candidate from the perspective of the broader scholarly discipline. Although the sample includes cases in which reviewers attempted to anticipate specific organizational requirements, their judgements first and foremost focused on scholarly aspects.

Organizational judgements, which reflect departmental requirements and expectations, appear in various places in the chronological choreography of appointment procedures. The laudation, in particular, focuses on organizational judgements. The committee's explanation of its selection of candidates for the shortlist, which is forwarded to the successive decision-making bodies in the university, goes beyond the scholarly qualities of the candidates. The committee's laudation is expected to argue from the point of view of the department and the university in general. Thus, laudations examine how well a prospective candidate fits into the departmental context.

To be sure, in addition to scholarly, formal and organizational judgements, other forms of judgement occur in appointment procedures. Archived records of these procedures shed light on official (often formal and bureaucratic) front-stage processes that, while crucial for any appointment, only complement undocumented backstage dynamics. Non-academic criteria likely play an important role in recruitment decisions. For example, there is an extensive literature illustrating the many ways in which gender and race matter for academic recruitment (Misra et al., 1999; Rivera 2017; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Further, studies from sectors other than academia suggest that processes of social and cultural matching also influence personnel selection (cf. Rivera, 2012). The sample documents in this project presumably obscure the non-academic judgements that participants in the procedure did not deem fit for official documentation. Archived records of appointment procedures document only what can be said (Foucault, 1972). There are organizational motives for presenting the decision-making process in a specific way and for not documenting certain decisions. This official form of presentation, however, does not undermine the sociological analysis. To the contrary, it is of particular sociological interest (cf. Garfinkel, 1967). The second part of the analysis focuses on how judgements are legitimated in the official presentation of appointment procedures.

Legitimizing judgements

Acknowledging a chosen candidate as professorial requires not only the choreography of judgements described above, but also the legitimization of these judgements. Analysis of the sample data reveals that appointment committees most often legitimize judgements via the unanimity of decisions, third-party endorsements and the transparency of the decision-making process.

Unanimous decisions

The sample committees labelled their decisions as unanimous with remarkable frequency. Their statements emphasized, for example, that the committee ‘nominated [a candidate] unanimously for the first place on the shortlist’ (1971) or that the committee was ‘in agreement about [a candidate] deserving the first place on the shortlist’ (1962). Committees also signalled unanimity via claims that a candidate ‘is one of the few, yes, indeed, the only German scholar on the job market that can be put on the first place of the shortlist’ (1962). Statements of unanimity are especially prevalent in laudations because committees use these documents to justify their shortlist to decision-making bodies. How did committees achieve this unanimity? In the German chair system, professorial appointments are made almost entirely among colleagues and are often based on implicit non-aggression pacts in which professors try to cooperate and make consensual decisions in order to avoid later punishment (Schimank, 2005). Although there are no data on the situated decision-making processes that occur in committee meetings, it is very likely that the unanimity of the judgements is also, at least partly, a retrospective construction (cf. Hirschauer, 2010; Huutoniemi, 2012). Because unanimity shields the committee’s judgements from doubts and makes their decisions appear more convincing in retrospect, unanimity is likely established ex-post the actual decision-making process.

Third-party endorsements by peers

The involvement of external peers in the decision-making process also lends legitimacy to judgements made by appointment committees. Scholars have long recognized the importance of third parties for the endorsement and consolidation of judgements (Sauder, 2006; Walker et al., 1986). Accordingly, the sample committees frequently referred to external reviews to support their own judgements. For example, in one laudation in 1959, the committee wrote, ‘As is certified by the attached reviews from [a renowned reviewer] and [another renowned reviewer], the candidate enjoys the general recognition of leading scholars.’ In other laudations, committees claimed that ‘all reviewers deem [a candidate] qualified for an appointment as a professor’ (1966) or that their ‘decision is approved by reviews of external colleagues’ (1985). When external peers and committees arrive at similar conclusions, the external endorsements lend credibility to the committee’s judgement and mark it as uncontroversial. This credibility derives from, first, the reviews representing recommendations from peers who are supposed to be particularly well positioned to assess the candidates and, second, the external position of the

peers. That is, by virtue of not being part of the appointing department, they are therefore presumably not motivated by self-interest with regard to the application.

Importantly, the legitimizing effect of external reviews rests on the assumption that external reviewers provide an impartial judgement of the candidates. However, in some appointment procedures, reviews seemed to have a different function; they merely affirmed the committee's decision about which candidates to shortlist. When soliciting reviews, committees can subtly indicate that they deem a specific candidate to be particularly suitable for the job. It is remarkable that the existence of these so-called courtesy reviews [*Gefälligkeitgutachten*] is evident even in the smoothed representation of appointment procedures in archival records. In one case in 1974, a reviewer complained about the current tendency to 'solicit reviews on individual candidates only after the actual appointment procedure is already completed. As a result, reviews not only serve a merely confirmatory function, but downright request a confirmation of the previously made decision'. Given this trend, it is notable that committees still draw on reviews to legitimize their decisions.

Transparency

In addition to unanimity and third-party endorsements, attempts to make the process transparent make up a third way of shoring up the legitimacy of judgements. Because most steps in the appointment procedure are closed to the public, transparency is crucial to establishing trust and producing accountability (Strathern, 2000). Thus, committees make an effort to document certain parts of the appointment procedure. For example, vacant professorships are advertised publicly. The historical material in the sample suggests that public advertisement was a relatively new development. As recently as the 1960s, instead of publicly advertising vacant posts, several of the sample appointment committees contacted the German Association of University Professors [*Deutscher Hochschulverband*] to inquire about the candidates who were on the job market at a given point in time.⁵ Committees then discussed these candidates in meetings and contacted them informally to determine whether they would be interested in taking the job. In other cases, committees contacted external peers before a professorship had been advertised. The peers then suggested prospective candidates whom they believed were qualified for the professorship in question. In yet other cases, reviewers recommended candidates to the committee without any formal application. Sometimes they even recommended a junior scholar under their own chair. In these cases, they asked the committee, for example, to 'not to interpret this as a "political" suggestion' (1963), or stating that 'I would prefer [this candidate] over all other candidates, not because he is, but despite him being my pupil.' (1965)

Although these non-transparent and non-standardized recruitment practices were outdated by the late 1960s, they were prevalent in the first years of the sample procedures, especially in smaller fields within the discipline, with small pools of suitable candidates. Non-standard recruitments did not necessarily result from an interest in obscuring appointment decisions. Appointment procedures for professorships in larger fields with more candidates began to openly advertise vacant professorships in the late 1950s. Against this backdrop, it is remarkable – and a testament to the pressure to implement

transparent recruitment procedures – that all universities in the sample advertised vacant positions just a decade later. Open advertisements contribute to the legitimacy of the judgements made in the appointment procedures because a public job advertisement gives all prospective candidates in a field the opportunity to apply.

Along with the public advertisement of vacant positions, another shift occurred over time that increased transparency. The comprehensive documentation of the decision-making process became more and more prevalent in the sample toward the end of the 1960s. Archived appointment records from the 1950s and early 1960s often only consist of informal letters exchanged between professors. Due to this lack of documentation, important decisions frequently remain invisible to outsiders and to posterity. For example, many archived records neither document who served on the committee, nor give any official reasons why certain candidates made the shortlist and others did not. Toward the end of the 1960s, however, a growing number of universities made it mandatory for committees to file appointment reports that document various aspects of the appointment procedure. These reports usually include the number of applicants, the name of every applicant, the names of committee members, the minutes of every committee meeting, the names of the candidates invited for job talks, the names of reviewers, and lastly the shortlist that represents the committee's final judgement. Appointment reports contribute to the transparency of the procedure because they make judgements and decisions accessible, and they make those involved in the decision-making process accountable.⁶

In sum, three main factors increase the legitimacy of judgements in appointment procedures: the unanimity of decisions, third-party endorsements from external peers, and the transparency of the procedure, including the public advertisement of professorships and the documentation of the decision-making process. Notably, the two latter measures became more prevalent in the sample after the mid-1960s, suggesting that committees felt an increasing need to more thoroughly legitimize the decisions that make professors. This development may have been the result of a more competitive academic employment market or increased public accountability (although cutbacks in the public funding of German universities did not begin until the 1980s). More generally, the legitimization of judgements is crucial on three fronts. First, legitimized decisions gain credibility among the scholarly community, which keenly observes any professorial appointment in its field. Second, it is more difficult for rejected candidates to contest legitimized judgements. Third, it is more difficult for a university's decision-makers to question or overturn legitimized judgements made by the hiring committee.

Discussion: The making of professors in appointment procedures

Making professors – and becoming a professor – is a social process with no definite conclusion. Appointment procedures are neither the first nor the last step of this process. Rather, situations in which academics are addressed as professors are scattered throughout everyday academic life. The current paper focuses on a specific aspect of this broader social process: how academics are acknowledged by their peers as *a someone* who is professorial in hiring decisions. My results suggest that the social processes of recognition and valorization comprise at least three forms of judgement: scholarly, formal and

organizational. At least three factors contribute to the legitimation of these judgements: the unanimity of decisions, third-party endorsements, and the transparency of the decision-making process. The interplay of judgements and legitimations is framed by a complex procedure that culminates in the selection of a candidate who is acknowledged as being professorial. In the process, the chosen candidate comes to occupy the subject position of professor and has a set of relevant qualities, accountabilities, rights, and duties conferred upon them. This symbolic act of recognition is crucial, as it not only represents the authentication of a scholarly persona, but also, particularly in the case of German full professors, influences the accumulation of resources and power through, for example, hiring decisions and intellectual leadership (Bourdieu, 1988).

In the German chair system, each chair is assigned to a specific research field, for example, Professor of Modern History. For this reason, candidates are judged not by how qualified they are to become a professor *in general*, but rather by how qualified they are to become a professor *in a specific field*. Thus, the subject position of professor designates more than just an organizational status position; every holder of a chair also occupies a scholarly domain. While scholarship and research are relevant for the position of professor in most national higher education systems, they are particularly important in the German case. In Germany, because research staff is expected to focus on the chair holder's research, professors are granted not only the formal right to appoint non-tenured staff but also extensive intellectual authority. The historical material analysed in this paper shows that scholarly judgements increasingly focused on candidates' publications. In the current climate of academic audit culture and metrification, the evaluation of candidates might include additional markers of scholarly performance, for example third-party funding or citation numbers.

The prevalence of the second type of judgement discussed in this paper, namely formal judgements, highlights the legality and rationality of the position of professor, for which formal qualifications are a precondition. Although the formal qualification for a German professorship can alternately be awarded on the basis of equivalent work (Höhle and Teichler, 2016) or, today, through a junior professorship (Zimmer, 2018), the *Habilitation* retains its central role in the discipline of history (and also in other book-oriented disciplines, cf. Weingart et al., 1991). Regardless of the specific marker, formal judgements in the archival material examined here highlight the need for candidates to be formally qualified for a professorship. Requiring a set of uniform formal qualifications for all candidates is crucial because, at least in principle, all German professors have the same organizational rights and duties (for example, with respect to administrative work, teaching, and research). During the historical period treated in this paper, all German full professors received the same basic salary; bonuses were negotiable only after reforms were implemented in 2001. This degree of stability is remarkable for a subject position. In contrast, the position of author can entail markedly different roles and responsibilities across disciplines (Hyland and Bondi, 2006). Further, 'author' can be interpreted differently depending on the respective social context. For example, 'Derrida' means something different in France than in the United States (Lamont, 1987). The formal stability of the subject position of professor is a peculiarity of the German case, where there is little variation across universities, or even across disciplines, in what it means to be a professor. Even in the wake of the 2001 reforms, the position retains a

somewhat formalized and static essence, granting its holders similar rights and duties and the same basic salary. In contrast, in other higher education systems, the position of professor can be interpreted in various ways with regard to, for example, salary or tenure (cf. Angermüller, 2017). One important prerequisite for German professors having equal legal status is that all candidates (i.e., potential professors) have the same level of formal qualifications. Thus, formal qualification is a criterion that seems insignificant at first glance, but, upon further examination, emerges as a key factor for the making of the subject position in question.

Candidates are also frequently judged with respect to the specific organizational concerns of the appointing department and university. This form of judgement is crucial to the understanding of the position of professor for two main reasons. First, organisational judgements refer to the position's embeddedness in its respective organisational context as well as its role as a functional part of the departmental status hierarchy. Full professors are not only intellectual leaders, as scholarly judgements suggest, but are also, especially in Germany, organizational leaders because they organize their chair autonomously. While other academic subject positions, such as researcher, are typically not constituted by organizational membership in a formal or permanent way,⁷ a professor holds a lifetime position as a member of a specific organisation. Because the position of professor is embedded in a specific organizational context, candidates are evaluated against this background. Thus, candidates are judged not only by their potential to perform as a professor *in a specific field*, but also by their potential to perform as a professor *within a specific organizational context*. The second reason organizational judgements facilitate an understanding of the position of professor is that within the German chair-faculty system, these judgements underscore that members of the committee are appointing a future colleague who will be involved not only in the department's administrative affairs, but also in coalitions that colleagues form in response to various issues, not the least of which is the appointment of other future colleagues. Thus, appointment procedures are geared toward identifying a good match between an individual candidate and departmental considerations.

The making of the position 'professor' relies not only on these three forms of judgement, but also on the legitimacy of the judgements. Understanding of the subject position of professor is enhanced by examining the ways in which appointment committees legitimize their judgements. First, judgements must be perceived as legitimate, because the hiring of a professor is extremely costly. Reviewers and committee members invest a great deal of time and effort in each appointment procedure. These procedures are also costly for the candidates, who must expose themselves to potential rejection and refusal. In the German system, appointment procedures are also costly for the appointing department and the university because professorships are usually lifetime positions. New colleagues will potentially serve for several decades. The high cost that a professorial appointment entails for all concerned parties is one reason that many aspects of the appointment procedure are geared toward the legitimacy of judgements.

The second reason for the importance of legitimate judgements is more analytical. Like other subject positions, the position of professor relies on its occupants being acknowledged as such by others. The scientific community, as well as administrative bodies within and beyond the university, must acknowledge a candidate as professorial

for her to actually be a professor. This recognition relies on the judgements in an appointment procedure being perceived as legitimate by a range of audiences across a range of contexts, including peers in different research fields, departmental colleagues, and university administrators.

It is important to consider the legitimation of judgements – in particular, measures to increase transparency – in the context of the type of historical material that was included in the sample. Considering the performative dimension of archived documents, appointment reports legitimize judgements by *performing* the transparency of important procedural steps. Remarkably, this performative character does not have significant consequences for the legitimacy of the decision-making process, which appears to gain credibility even if the transparency is only enacted by documents (cf. Flyverbom et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This analysis focused on the three most prevalent forms of judgement and the factors that legitimize those judgements that were found in archival records of hiring decisions. The results reflect the historical period (1950–1985), the peculiarities of the empirical material, the specific characteristics of the discipline of history, and the particularity of the German case. Thus, for example, current diversity politics – which were inconceivable during the period of time studied here – might lead to gender and ethnicity being considered as legitimate evaluative criteria. Other factors, such as class, might be highly influential for professorial recruitment but not be formally acknowledged and thus not archived. Further, current appointments likely draw on yet other criteria that have only recently become relevant. For example, metric assessments of research performance such as third-party funding or citation counts likely play an important role in professorial hiring, either competing with or complementing more traditional criteria. Beyond historical shifts such as these, the empirical material used in the current analysis has a systematic bias because most social interactions that occur during committee meetings or job talks are not archived. In addition, disciplinary differences in the making of professors were beyond the scope of this paper but could be examined in future research. Lastly, this study focuses on the unique case of German professors, thus inviting comparative perspectives from other countries.

To conclude, I would like to re-emphasize three general points about the position of professor. First, it is rather stable relative to other subject positions. For example, ‘researcher’ can be interpreted in many ways. It can be associated with attributes as wide-ranging as craftsmanship, originality and creativity, specialization, and team membership. Being a researcher can entail very different things across different research fields. In the German case, the position of professor, which is embedded in the organizational setting of a university, is comparatively stable. All full professors – that is, all academics who are formally acknowledged as being professorial – hold basically the same organizational rights and duties, which are not up for negotiation, but are institutionally and legally binding.

While the position of professor is relatively stable compared with other academic subject positions, the historical perspective of this paper reveals certain changes in the position over time. Most notably, the conditions by which academics are acknowledged

as professorial have changed. For example, committees increasingly judge candidates' research by their publications, considering such things as their content, reception, and quantity. In addition, experience in administrative work and the acquisition of external funding have become increasingly important criteria for judgement. The number of archived applications in the sample also suggests growing competition for professorships. Not coincidentally, over the same period, committees have attempted to make appointment procedures more transparent. When appointments are scarce and fiercely contested, it is even more important for appointment decisions to be perceived as legitimate.

Just as the making of the position of professor has undergone changes over time, it also varies across national higher education systems. While scholarly reputation as a researcher can be transnational, what it means to be a professor differs remarkably across nations. Although many scholars maintain that higher education policies throughout the world have converged (but see Gornitzka and Maassen, 2014; Schimank, 2005), recent research has shown that a German professor still differs from, for example, a professor in the United States. The characteristics of the respective positions, such as autonomy, salary, and teaching obligations, vary markedly (Angermüller, 2017), and the procedures by which professors are appointed also vary across national higher education systems (Musselin, 2010). However, the presence of different career structures, appointment procedures, and regulations in other higher education systems does not imply that it is not a subject position in those systems. Rather, these differences mean that the subject position is constructed and interpreted differently in other national arrangements, which only underscores the necessity of conducting additional case studies to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of 'professor'.


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Notes

1. This perspective might be more balanced if STS also considered fields in the social sciences and humanities (SSH), where scholars entertain a more complicated relationship to realist statements. Many SSH fields do not hold objectivity as an ideal that is to be achieved by erasing subjective traces in research (Daston, 1992), quite the contrary, they rely on subjects as sources and addresses of intellectual claims.

2. It is not by accident that many exemplary publications mobilize the motif of 'becoming'. See, for example, *How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher* (Lamont, 1987), *Becoming a Pragmatist Philosopher* (Gross, 2002), *How to Become an Academic Philosopher* (Angermüller, 2013).
3. All quotes have been translated from German. In order to guarantee anonymity for those involved in the recruitment procedures studied here, I omit original archival references as well as information that would allow the identification of individuals.
4. Archived applications do not necessarily equal actual applications. For example, the applications that are eventually archived might be only from candidates that are put on the long list.
5. The German Association of University Professors [*Deutscher Hochschulverband*] operates a directory of scholars who have completed the *Habilitation*, which again underscores the importance of this formal criterion for any further judgement.
6. German law on data privacy makes it extremely difficult to access archival records for the most recent 30 years. As an effect, the accessibility of said records is given rather in principle than per se. However, as I argue above, even a transparency that is merely enacted has a legitimizing effect for judgements.
7. Researcher positions that are closely aligned to organizational affiliations constitute interesting borderline cases, for example, when researchers are members of the Chicago School or the Vienna Circle.

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