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The Resilience of Occupations in Occupational Fields. Disruption and Reinstitutionalisation of the Piano Makers' Occupation

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Abstract

Recurrently, dual vocational education and training systems are said to be unable to adapt to rapid changes of labour market requirements because of their large number of specialised occupations. To reduce the number of occupations and create broader profiles is one proposal for increasing flexibility, for example, by combining similar occupations in so-called occupational fields. However, little is known about the actual practices of establishing occupational fields. Based on the case study of piano makers in Switzerland, we shed light on an occupational associations' institutional work. Regulatory changes disrupted the piano makers' occupation. Yet, the occupational association reinstitutionalised it as part of the musical instrument makers' occupational field together with other occupations. More than a decade later, the piano makers are reintroducing their former occupational title, which is deeply connected to their occupational identity. Therefore, this case study illustrates the resilience of occupations within occupational fields.

Keywords

occupational field; institutional work; deinstitutionalisation; reinstitutionalisation; occupational identity

1 Introduction

Dual vocational education and training (VET) systems are characterised by the occupational principle (*Berufsprinzip*), which is a social identification and allocation instrument that implies a close relationship between certified occupational qualification and employment activity (Hellwig, 2008; Severing, 2014). Recurrently, dual VET systems have been attributed to a lack of flexibility when requirements in the labour market change rapidly—for example, in times of fast socio-technological change like the current digital transformation. A repeatedly proposed

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measure is to increase the systems' flexibility by reducing the number of occupations, for example, by concentrating on core occupations or combining related occupations into so-called occupational families or *occupational fields*. This should broaden occupational profiles to improve individual mobility in the labour market and increase the efficiency of training (Häfeli & Gasche, 2002; Maurer & Pieneck, 2013; Seufert, 2018).

Already at the beginning of 2000, the reduction of the number of occupations was discussed. In Switzerland, a VET policy reform provided the opportunity to reorganise occupations in 2004. All occupations were to be adapted to the reformed national VET act, which prescribed new training standards. Then, around 300 different occupations on the VET track at the post-secondary level existed (Berner, 2013)—among them were 130 occupations with less than 100 apprenticeships per year (Häfeli & Gasche, 2002).

In Switzerland, occupational associations are the main actors when it comes to defining occupational training content and creating apprenticeship positions. This task is delegated to them based on the assumption that they know best what the labour market needs and can ensure a continuous adaptation of VET. Occupational associations are, therefore, important educational actors (Baumeler, Engelage, & Strelbel, 2018; Strelbel, Engelage, & Baumeler, 2019). In addition, the federal state and the cantons are involved in VET governance and training takes place in firms and VET schools.

During the implementation of the 2004 reform, public authorities urged some of the smaller occupations to merge. This pressure provoked substantial institutional work from occupational associations. Institutional work is the purposive action of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The institutional work perspective states that institutions—or, in our case, occupations—do not only need to be purposefully and actively created and maintained, but their *disruption* also implies effort (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Against this backdrop, we investigate the case of the piano makers' occupation as an example of one of the smaller occupations that had to merge into an occupational field and as an example of institutional disruption. The long-established traditional handicraft could not uphold the legitimacy of retaining its individual apprenticeship and lost its occupational title. We address the following research question: Which institutional work practices did the piano makers' association develop to deal with the deinstitutionalisation of their occupation?

Based on this in-depth case study, we contribute to the understanding of occupational fields and institutional work in two ways. First, we detail processes of occupational field construction and identify challenges. Here, we pay special attention to the importance of the occupational identity of the affected occupational association. Second, we shed light on institutional work in deinstitutionalization processes, because there is little research that investigates the practices through which actors aim to disrupt institutions (Clemente & Roulet, 2015; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Occupations and occupational fields

Institutions are enduring elements of social life that provide templates for action, cognition, and emotion (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). An occupation (*Beruf*) can be conceived of an institution (Bechky, 2011; Lawrence, 2004). It is defined as “a formally recognized social category, with regulative structure concerning VET, qualifications, promotion and the range of knowledge, both practical and theoretical, that is required to undertake the activities that fall within it” (Clarke, 2011, p. 103). It represents a division of labour, also referring to particular wage relations, social position, and social status.

Occupations are based on collective governance where consensus-oriented and time-consuming decision-making involves key sectoral stakeholders (Clarke, Winch, & Brockmann, 2013). Because they are the result of negotiation processes, occupations are social constructs rather than mere reproductions of activities found in the labour market (Dehnborstel, 2005; Schwarz & Bretschneider, 2014). Further, occupations are not only legally, but also normatively and cultural-cognitively defined (Nicklich & Fortwengel, 2017).

In the last century, economic and technological development has led to an increasing number of specialised occupations as a result of the differentiation and specialisation of work (Pahl, 2001). The increasing differentiation of occupational profiles has repeatedly been a topic of VET policy (Maurer & Pieneck, 2013). While employers are usually interested in VET that is closely tailored to their needs and allows apprentices to work productively as quickly as possible, narrow occupational profiles can restrict individual mobility on the labour market. Further, it is argued that constant technological change requires broader competencies. In addition, a larger number of occupations raises costs for the public sector, as occupation-specific offers at VET schools are mostly publicly financed. The discussions, therefore, revolve around the fundamental question of how narrow or broad occupational profiles should be designed.

The construction of an occupational field is one attempt to reduce complexity. It comprises of a group of occupations that have certain similarities in terms of activity, training path, and requirements (Häfeli & Gasche, 2002). The construction of occupational fields should provide apprentices with broader skills, improve the mobility of workers within the field, and increase efficiency in training and regulation. It should also improve transparency by reducing the amount of information for young people who are about to choose an occupation. In occupational fields, training of different occupations can be combined, but there also remains specialised content to account for the peculiarities of individual occupations (Schwarz & Bretschneider, 2014).

2.2 Institutional work and disruption

The institutional work perspective (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; 2011) deals with various forms of institutional change and focuses on the role of actors in these processes. It states that institutions need to be purposefully and actively created, maintained, and disrupted, and highlights the knowledgeable, creative, and practical work of individuals and collective actors attempting to shape institutions. Institutional work involves reflexive awareness and effort and addresses cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars of institutions (Scott, 2008). This theoretical stream is especially interested in studying institutional work that is “nearly invisible and often mundane, as in the day-to-day adjustments, adaptations and compromises of actors” (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1).

The institutional work of *disruption* refers to deinstitutionalisation, which is a “process by which the legitimacy of an established or institutionalized organizational practice erodes or discontinues” (Oliver, 1992, p. 564). Here, organisations fail to continually reproduce previously taken-for-granted actions. This might be the case when changes in the political field, in laws and societal values, or functional economic considerations call the legitimacy of a traditional practice into question. Then, organisations might respond to changing circumstances either by proactively and consciously deinstitutionalising a practice or they might exert little control over environmental change and react passively or subconsciously. Consequently, the delegitimation of an institution might also foster institutional replacement (Oliver, 1992) or “repair work”, which is institutional work carried out to undo disruption (Micelotta & Washington, 2013).

For example, outsider-driven deinstitutionalisation, such as regulatory change, might destabilise established practices (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Organisations may react by innovating and seeking solutions. These innovations need to be justified to gain broader acceptance and legitimacy. The innovation is only fully reinstitutionalised when the new ideas and practices become taken-for-granted as a natural and appropriate arrangement. If the reinstitutionalisation process is successful, new ideas and practices become embedded and routinised, which allows their reproduction over time.

3 Method: Qualitative case study

We explore our research question by using a qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). The aim of case study research is to conduct in-depth analysis, focussing on the participants' perspective (Mills, Harrison, Franklink, & Birks, 2017). It intends to provide a comprehensive holistic account that helps in understanding the phenomenon.

The case selected here is the piano makers' occupation. After the Swiss VET reform of 2004, public authorities aimed at reducing the number of occupations by merging small occupations. This led to the disruption of the piano maker occupation. The piano makers' apprenticeship merged with organ builders and wind instrument makers to become the musical instrument makers' apprenticeship.

Typically, case studies use various data sources (Mills et al., 2017). First, we analysed official documents concerning the VET reform to set the ground for our empirical study. Second, our case study was based on theory-generating, semi-structured expert interviews with a key representative of the occupational association and two pedagogical consultants in the reform process for the smallest occupations (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009). Third, we used document analysis. Data sources were official communications, such as the magazines of the occupational association, websites, newspaper articles, and government documents, as well as statistical information. The analysis of the different sources served to reconstruct the occupational reform process (Langley, 1999) and to identify the occupational associations' institutional work.

4 Results: Disruption and Reinstitutionalisation of the Occupation "Piano Makers"

Piano making and tuning have always been a niche occupation with low numbers of apprentices. Yet, while in the 20th century a piano still belonged in every good room, in the 1960s the Swiss had to compete with imports from the Far East. At the same time, modern residential construction meant that larger pianos hardly found any room. Today, ten times more digital than acoustic pianos are imported into Switzerland and musical instrument makers specializing in the piano are mainly concerned with maintaining, repairing, and tuning these instruments (Grossrieder, 2018).

The association of the piano makers, founded in 1947, brings together around 240 piano makers and tuners from all Swiss language regions. It defines the content of vocational training, arranges expertise, and organises events and further training. The management of the association works on a voluntary basis without payment. Piano makers were among the first to implement the 2004 reform in their occupation and the apprenticeships in the newly created occupational field started in 2007 with an average of 12 apprentices per year.

During the VET reform in the early 2000s, public authorities identified piano makers as one of the small occupations that should be merged into an occupational field. They received a letter from the public authorities saying this occupation could no longer exist if it was not integrated into an occupational field and they were urged to join forces with other small craft occupations in the woodworking sector. This started the outsider-driven deinstitutionalisation process and provoked substantial institutional work of the piano makers and tuners association.

Fearing their occupation would lose its recognition as an apprenticeship, they first examined alternatives. One possibility was to stop training in Switzerland and send apprentices to a German training centre. However, this idea was rejected with the argument that training in Germany lasted only three years instead of four and thus would not offer the same quality. Another argument was that training was not offered in French and, therefore, French-speaking Swiss were left behind. Finally, the association took part in the meetings of the smallest occupations organised by the public administration to find out if the suggested merger with other wood occupations was possible. These first meetings, however, did not bring any agreement because of large differences in the individual occupational activities. However, the occupations that built and maintained musical instruments showed more commonalities than other woodworking occupations. Consequently, as one of the first small occupations, the piano makers joined forces with the wind instrument makers and the organ builders to found the umbrella occupational association of musical instrument makers. Thus, they became pioneers in establishing a so-called occupational field, which also meant they started reinstitutionalising their apprenticeship.

The public administration supported the occupational reforms financially, which allowed for developing educational plans and teaching materials. The first challenge was identifying common educational content for the three occupations and determining the areas in which occupation-specific education was required. Moreover, all educational plans were to be formulated and elaborated in accordance with the new competence orientation at the time. An educational consultant was commissioned to provide support and the process was initiated in accordance with the legal requirements. A reform commission, including representatives of the Confederation and the cantons, the presidents and examination experts of the associations, as well as some teachers and the Swiss trade association, was formed. They discussed the issues associated with merging occupations in detail because the novelty of the procedure for musical instrument makers served as an exemplary case for subsequent mergers. Musical instrument makers managed to assert their interests because their president was a member of the Swiss National Council and was thus able to negotiate with federal and cantonal representatives and make use of a well-developed network.

At the same time, it became clear that professional management of the umbrella organisation of the musical instrument makers was indispensable because the members of the organisation, who had previously worked voluntarily, were no longer able to cope with the additional workload and the loss of income while doing institutional work. This meant that paid staff was hired for the administrative work. However, the membership fees of the associations were not sufficient to finance the staff of the umbrella association. To raise additional funds, an obligatory training fund was set up, into which all firms had to pay. This led to some contestations and, finally, a firm who did not want to pay was sued. In addition, the association argued that importers of musical instruments also benefitted from the good education in Switzerland. Because they had an interest in skilled workers able to maintain the instruments, it was fair to demand a levy from these firms.

Besides new training content and the umbrella association, the musical instrument makers had to find a location for their new vocational school and training centre. Several cantons rejected an application, only one canton saw the musical instrument makers' request as an opportunity to revive an agricultural vocational school. Private patrons of the arts donated a considerable amount of money to equip this school with training material.

Today, the training consists of a basic study course, organised together with other instrument makers, and specific learning content within the field of piano making and tuning. The apprentices are trained in companies, as well as at a training centre, which offers inter-company courses. During their training, the students build an acoustic piano and thus gain in-depth knowledge of the structure and interaction of the individual parts of the instrument. The

lessons in the training centre are held bilingually and the learning material is available in German and French.

Notwithstanding this successful reinstitutionalisation of the piano making apprenticeship within an occupational field, merging came at a high price for piano makers. They were not allowed to keep their occupational title and from then on were called "musical instrument makers with a specialisation in piano making and tuning". It was difficult and painful to communicate this loss of identity to the members of the association. Or, as the president of the piano makers' association expressed it more than ten years after the founding of the occupational field: "We are no musical instrument makers; we make pianos!"

5 Conclusion

Dual VET is often praised for its proximity to the labour market because of the involvement of economic stakeholders. Nevertheless, it is criticised for being too complex and slow in times of a rapidly changing world of work. The differentiation into many specialised occupations is regarded as being inert, regulation-intensive, and inflexible. One solution repeatedly proposed is to increase the efficiency and transparency of training and the mobility of workers is reducing the number of occupations, for example by concentrating on core occupations or competencies, constructing occupational families, or merging related occupations into occupational fields.

The case of the piano makers shows how a regulatory reform delegitimised the existence of a long-standing occupation. This occupation, therefore, needed to merge with other occupations into an occupational field. Yet, the occupation did not just disappear. By identifying the piano makers' associations' institutional work, we document how they reconstructed and reinstitutionalised their occupation. Crucially, cultural-cognitive and normative factors influenced the organisational effort, as well as the high commitment of a large number of association members to the value of apprenticeships. Over the years, the identification of piano makers with their own occupation has been a guiding principle. Today, the piano makers are at the verge of regaining their formerly abandoned occupational title and, thereby, successfully completing their reinstitutionalisation work. This finding illustrates the resilience of occupations and occupational associations.

In conclusion, the creation of an occupational field at least partially calls into question the occupational principle. Thus, such a policy measure cannot be thought about without considering the governance structure of the respective VET system. If, as in Switzerland, occupational associations are equipped with far-reaching responsibilities, it is necessary to consider these collective actors. If their occupational identity is not preserved, occupational associations may engage in work to reinstitutionalise their occupation or, if they fail to do so, they might no longer be committed to continually offer apprenticeships and their member companies might lose their willingness to train. Thus, this case study indicates that policy-makers might need to strike a balance between searching for training synergies and respecting occupational identities. Finally, whether reducing the number of occupations actually has the effect of increasing efficiency and improving labour market mobility remains an open question for further research.

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