



The challenge of occupational prestige for occupational identities: Comparing bricklaying and automation technology apprentices in Switzerland

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Abstract

Occupational prestige, the hierarchical perception of occupations, is a neglected issue in studies on vocational education and training, although the attractiveness of apprenticeship programs is strongly affected by their prestige. Based on a qualitative study, this article examines the identity strategies of apprentices whose training programs lack prestige. It understands not only identity but also prestige as dynamically and relationally constructed in everyday life and thus empirically contributes to contemporary theoretical debates about occupational prestige. It compares two occupations – bricklaying, which requires lower/medium skills, and automation technology, which requires higher skills – and shows that both are faced with a lack of prestige, although unequally, thus leading the apprentices to employ different strategies to valorize and engage with the training. These strategies draw on the meaning that the apprentices find in their work, the advanced skills the training requires, the variety of work tasks involved and the career possibilities the occupations provide. The results demonstrate that the apprentices are confronted with a vocational-academic divide that exists in many countries. This divide poses a threat to apprentices' identities, and their strategies aim to either maintain or reverse it. Although the prestige of apprenticeships is related to objective differences between both educational tracks and occupations, social actors can negotiate superiority and inferiority. Thus, the article also provides some practical recommendations for how apprentices confronted with a lack of social recognition can be encouraged to continue engaging with their training.

Keywords Prestige · Switzerland · Occupation · Identity · Bricklaying · Automation

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Introduction

Education policies in Switzerland strongly rely on vocational education and training (VET) because of its potential to integrate young people into the labor market (Korber and Oesch 2016). Switzerland's VET system is regarded as so successful that educational delegations from several countries have visited the country over the last decade to study it, hoping to find a solution to the problem of youth unemployment (Strahm et al. 2016). Since two-thirds of young people in Switzerland pursue an apprenticeship rather than a general academic program after compulsory education (SEFRI 2017), VET is also often portrayed as popular among the general public in the country (Cattaneo and Wolter 2016).

This article adds nuance to this positive image of the Swiss VET system by showing, on the basis of a qualitative study, how bricklaying and automation technology apprentices confront the low social standing of their vocational training. In daily life, these apprentices do not always receive the social recognition they believe their apprenticeship deserves. Building on occupational identity theory (Dubar 1998), the article demonstrates that these two groups of apprentices not only suffer from a lack of occupational prestige¹ and recognition, but also employ strategies to construct valuable occupational identities.

The social standing of VET has recently become an international academic issue (Billett 2014) because parents and their children are often prejudiced against apprenticeship programs, while educational policies increasingly promote them (Abrassart and Wolter 2019). Billett (2014) demonstrates that the low prestige of VET relative to other educational pathways is long standing because elites have long dominated discourses about occupations (that they neither teach nor practice). The sharp distinction between intellectual and manual work illustrates one powerful discourse that has contributed to the devaluation of VET (ibid.).

However, there are differences between countries in this regard. As in other German-speaking countries, the labor market in Switzerland builds on the occupational concept of *Beruf*, which elevates the value of vocational education (Billet 2014) because *a Beruf* combines a large number of activities and qualifications. As a result, VET is certainly more popular and valued in Switzerland than in other countries, but the academic-vocational divide nonetheless persists (Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Moret et al. 2017; Abrassart and Wolter 2019), and it informs the status of post-compulsory-education pathways.

As elsewhere, general academic education in Switzerland is highly valued, but access to it is highly restricted and depends strongly on high-school performance. Access to either general academic or vocational post-compulsory education is determined during the eleven years of compulsory schooling, and especially the last three, when pupils are streamed according to their performance into different school tracks or subject levels. In theory, pupils can switch tracks or levels, but it is difficult for them to do so in practice. It is well known that this tracking into educational pathways strongly reproduces social inequalities. Children from families with a higher socioeconomic status are more often in the highest tracks, which lead to a general A-level (Felouzis and Charmillot 2017).

¹ We understand occupational prestige as a hierarchical perception of occupations.

There is also a divide within the large number of VET programs² dedicated to students not eligible for or interested in the academic path. Most apprenticeships demand low or medium competence in literacy and mathematics, but some have advanced requirements (Stalder 2011). Young people who perform poorly in school and/or are enrolled in the lowest track during compulsory school have virtually no chance to enroll in advanced apprenticeships programs (Meyer 2018). A priori, all apprentices can obtain a professional A-level during VET or afterwards that allows them to enter universities of applied sciences. In practice, however, apprentices from advanced VET programs obtain this degree much more often (Jäpel 2017).

A recent Swiss survey on adults' views of the prestige of occupations confirms this academic-vocational divide and the divide between occupations based on the complexity of the skills required, regardless of whether those skills are manual or intellectual (Abrassart and Wolter 2019). This article contributes to research on these issues by showing, based on an inductive data analysis, how apprentices confront the academic-vocational and other divides (e.g. manual vs. intellectual labor) as they inform the perceived occupational prestige of apprenticeship programs. More specifically, this article focuses on a challenge that apprentices face, but which has been neglected in VET scholarship – the lack of social recognition for their occupation – and it gives a voice to apprentices who experience it. The article focuses on the apprentices' occupational identity strategies as ways of valorizing and engaging with their training.

In contrast to mainstream occupational prestige studies, our research privileges a dynamic perspective on prestige as an object of social construction (Lynn and Ellerbach 2017) and negotiation (Duemmler and Caprani 2017). This article is inspired by research on dirty work, which studies the stigmas attached to occupations that are socially, physically or morally tainted. That research emphasizes the various cognitive, affective and behavioral strategies people develop to normalize taint and construct positive identities (Ashforth et al. 2007; Simpson et al. 2012; Shigihara 2018). At the same time, this article mobilizes a more general theoretical framework of occupational prestige because the apprenticeships under study are not necessarily stigmatized. In order to address the relative valuation of occupations, the article compares bricklaying, which according to the official body regulating VET in Switzerland³ requires medium-level skills, and automation technology, which requires advanced skills. Remarkably, apprentices of both occupations are concerned with a lack of occupational prestige, although unequally, thus leading to different identity strategies to valorize and engage with their training.

The article first presents the theoretical approach to occupational identities it employs and relates it to the issue of occupational prestige. It then describes the two apprenticeships and presents the methods used in the qualitative comparative study. The presentation of the empirical results focuses on the differences and similarities between the two groups of apprentices struggling with questions of prestige and developing strategies of valuation. The conclusion places the results in Switzerland's wider economic and educational context, discusses their theoretical implications for the study of occupational prestige and offers practical suggestions for dealing with low prestige within VET.

² Most apprenticeships combine workplace learning in companies with theoretical education in professional schools and practical training in workshops.

³ <https://www.orientation.ch/>

Theoretical background: The construction of occupational identities and the role of occupational prestige

During VET, apprentices not only acquire vocational knowledge, but also transform their personal and social identities in the process of developing their occupational identities (Billet 2007). This process of becoming a professional, as Chan (2013), for example, showed in her longitudinal study with bakers, starts with belonging to a workplace and develops with the acquisition of skills, the consolidation of knowledge, the transformation of individual dispositions and the formation of an occupational identity. Colley et al. (2003) also refer to the development of a vocational habitus consistent with the vocational culture and the demands of the workplace. Although occupational learning and identities are interrelated (Brown et al. 2007), this article concentrates on the latter: it studies how apprentices construct their occupational self-image by searching for a balance between their own interests, abilities and aspirations, on the one hand, and the characteristics and demands of the occupation they are learning, on the other (Dubar 1998; Colley et al. 2003; Cohen-Scali 2003).

Occupational identities have been theorized from various perspectives and studied from different empirical angles (Alvesson et al. 2008). A common approach to the study of the construction of occupational identities is to understand them in the context of the individuals' lives and biographical experiences (Brockmann 2013; Dubar 1998). This article instead concentrates more on the relational and dynamic character of identity (Jenkins 2008), because this focus makes it possible to bring together questions of occupational identity and prestige. As a result, this article focuses not on individual identities, but on social recognition and related identity strategies (Dubar 1998).

Identities are always constructed in relation to others (e.g. clients, teachers, bosses, colleagues, family, friends). Occupational identities are transmitted, developed and recognized at work and/or places of training through the belonging and socialization of different members of the work community (Lave and Wenger 1991). Through the work community, occupational newcomers also come into contact with the available social narratives about the occupation (Alvesson et al. 2008), for instance narratives that value the work (Moret et al. 2017).

In this way, occupational self-image is always related to the image attributed to a given occupation by significant others, which can both help and hinder an individual's social recognition (Dubar 1998). This relational aspect includes the social perception that occupational outsiders have and communicate about the occupation or those who engage in it (Kreiner et al. 2006), which will be addressed here with the concept of prestige.

Occupational prestige captures societal perceptions of work and describes how occupations are valued in terms of reputation or honor (Treiman 1977). Prestige locates occupations in a hierarchy and is related to questions of power and inequality (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Eriksson 2013). The valuation is based on multiple attributes, but occupations are mostly esteemed (or not) on the basis of the level of education and the complexity of the skills required. Other dimensions that affect occupational prestige are the rewards (e.g. salary, working conditions) and the authority (e.g. responsibility over others) they grant to workers (Treiman 1977). While occupational-prestige rankings have been found to be highly stable and consistent over time and across contexts (ibid.), these findings have been criticized because prestige rankings are by definition average

scores that ignore variations within occupations and between individuals (Zhou 2005; Lynn and Ellerbach 2017).

Contemporary prestige studies in the tradition of social constructivism take such variations seriously because they want to understand how people – and what kinds of people – come to agree on occupational-prestige rankings (Zhou 2005; Eriksson 2013). Unlike earlier functionalist approaches (Treiman 1977), they do not conceive of occupational-prestige rankings as uncontested. Recent studies, for instance, have shown that individuals with higher levels of education are more unified in their prestige rankings and more likely to value occupations requiring higher education than individuals with lower levels of education (Lynn and Ellerbach 2017).

In light of this research, we distinguish between the social stratification of occupations based on their objective attributes (e.g. skill level) and the social prestige of those occupations based on the perception of those attributes (Smith and Teicher 2017). Objective attributes are only relevant for prestige if people recognize them and agree that they are indicative of superiority or inferiority and give them symbolic significance in social interactions (Goldthorpe and Hope 2014). Moreover, people, in particular those who are in unprivileged social positions and lack occupational prestige, might contest hierarchies and struggle to have their occupational identities recognized (Duemmler and Caprani 2017).

Contemporary theoretical and empirical work addresses not only the relational, but also the dynamic character of identity, and it thus focuses on identity strategies rather than stable core identities (Jenkins 2008; Dubar 1998). Individuals continuously construct, in interaction with others, their self in workplace settings and make meaning out of their ongoing work experiences (Zittoun 2016). Moreover, they neither seamlessly adopt the occupational identity transmitted from inside the work community nor simply integrate societal perceptions of the occupational prestige accorded to their apprenticeship (Colley et al. 2003). They can negotiate their identities in interaction with others and valorize their occupational identities by employing various strategies to find a balance between their person and their work (Thole 2015). Such identity strategies might include occupational ideologies (e.g. overemphasizing valuable aspects of the work), social comparisons with others (e.g. with people who earn less) and behavioral defense tactics (e.g. ignoring or convincing others) (Kreiner et al. 2006; Simpson et al. 2012). A former study with retail apprentices showed that their strategies involve valorizing the prestige of shops, products and the skills necessary to perform the work (own publication). Most retail apprentices also perceive the work as a stepping-stone to prestigious occupational positions in the future (see also Shigihara 2018).

VET in bricklaying and automation technology

There are over 230 different VET programs in Switzerland, a large majority of which combine workplace learning at the company, practical training in workshops and theoretical learning in the VET school. Although bricklaying and automation technology apprenticeships together account for only 1 percent of apprenticeships in Switzerland, they are important programs in the construction and industrial sectors. Both are predominantly male occupations (95–99%).⁴

⁴ Swiss Statistical Office 2018 (own calculations)

The automation technology apprenticeship trains apprentices in the manufacturing and maintenance of different machines, apparatuses and automated systems. It also includes activities such as planning, documenting, programming and bringing these machines, apparatuses and systems into service. Apprentices acquire theoretical knowledge two days per week in a VET school and learn and work three days in an industrial company.⁵ The apprenticeship lasts four years and requires both high intellectual abilities and high grades in compulsory school, in particular in mathematics; in general, companies apply entry tests. The apprenticeship also exists as a full-time program exclusively in VET schools, mostly for those apprentices who do not find a training company.

Unlike in some other European countries (Clarke et al. 2013), the bricklaying apprenticeship provides a large spectrum of construction skills with different types of stones, prefabricated elements and concrete. It also involves the construction of concrete forms and drainage systems, as well as work planning and reading plans and measurements at the building site. Apprentices acquire theoretical knowledge one day per week in a VET school and learn and work four days in a construction firm. The apprenticeship lasts three years and requires medium intellectual abilities and school performance.

In contrast to the automation technology program, the bricklaying program is faced with more early contract terminations (30% compared to 15%) (Stalder and Schmid 2006) and recruitment problems (Hasler 2016). As a result, the national federation of builders has invested significantly in campaigns to increase the attractiveness of this occupation among young people and their parents,⁶ for instance by emphasizing the career possibilities it opens up. The occupation suffers from the perception of bricklaying as hard manual labor that is often performed in difficult weather.

Bricklaying is thus less prestigious than automation technology, but working conditions for bricklayers are better than for other trades because of the national and cantonal labor contracts obtained by their strong labor union. These contracts regulate salaries and benefits, working hours and even retirement age,⁷ which can have an impact on bricklayers' occupational prestige and identity.

Methods

This article is based on a qualitative study that investigates how bricklaying and automation technology apprentices⁸ construct and negotiate their occupational identities. Data was gathered during 2018 and 2019 in four Swiss VET schools. The apprentices already had significant experience of their apprenticeship, as they were mostly at the end of their first or second year.

In order to examine their subjective perspectives on their vocational training, we conducted interviews with 24 apprentices in bricklaying and 31 in automation technology. The interviews started with an open biographical part addressing the transition phase from compulsory school to VET. In the following, more structured part, we asked

⁵ The first year consists mainly of training in workshops organized within either the VET school or the company to acquire the basics of the trade.

⁶ <http://www.baumeister.ch/de/berufsbildung/berufswerbung>

⁷ <http://www.baumeister.ch/de/unternehmensfuehrung/gesamtarbeitsvertraege-gav>

⁸ The study is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

questions about apprentices' learning and working experiences at the workplace in order to understand how they made sense of them. Questions addressed a wide spectrum of issues: work tasks, conditions, relations, support, learning progress and future career perspectives. The issue of prestige was addressed with open questions regarding how other people (e.g. friends and family members) reacted when they came to know about their apprenticeship.

The apprentices were sampled in such a way as to ensure a wide spectrum in terms of regional origin and the type and size of company they were employed by. However, the apprentices were mainly men: because of their underrepresentation, only one woman per trade could be interviewed.⁹ The apprentices in automation technology had more often been enrolled in the highest track during compulsory school, and half of them were completing a professional A-level during the apprenticeship. In contrast, only two bricklaying apprentices had started a professional A-level, and both had abandoned it during the first year. As well, a large majority of bricklaying apprentices had been enrolled in the lowest track during compulsory schooling.

Because occupational identities are also constructed in social interaction, we also conducted focus groups (3–4 per occupation) with the apprentices in which topics similar to those in the interviews were discussed, and we observed classes and breaks for eight to ten days at each school, and well as some practical workshops. Spending several days with the apprentices made it possible to establish a relationship of trust.

Although we take into account occupational identity theory and occupational prestige, this research is inductive and close to the concerns and experiences of the participants, in particular during fieldwork and data analysis. The empirical material was transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2014). We first employed *open coding* related closely to the data and later developed more abstract categories and the links between them. We regularly discussed the codes and categories to ensure the validity of our interpretations. The three forms of data collection (interviews, discussions, observations) might generate different data, as they were produced in different contexts. Interested in apprentices' occupational identities, we privileged the analysis of the personal interviews and used the other data to support and add nuance to the analysis. Occupational prestige was one of the core categories that emerged in the analysis. The apprentices spoke similarly during interviews and group discussions about the devaluation of their apprenticeships and employed common narratives to secure their occupational identities. The quotations and examples in the following section are not anomalous, but illustrative of the general results of the study.

Occupational prestige: Unequal challenges for bricklaying and automation technology apprentices

The analysis shows that questions of occupational prestige are raised differently within the two apprenticeship contexts. When bricklaying apprentices were asked how people

⁹ Based on gender segregation in the labor market, it is often assumed that female work is less valued than male work. Although the proportion of women in an occupation has a negative effect on salaries, studies show that the relationship is less clear for prestige (Magnusson 2008; García-Mainar et al. 2018). Nonetheless, gender images of occupations and male superiority play a role when people grade prestige (Eriksson 2013).

in general reacted to their occupation, the image of their apprenticeship was described in slightly negative terms. Many felt that bricklaying is perceived as a job for people with lower intellectual abilities who performed poorly in compulsory school and thus had no other option. In particular, apprentices from the advanced school track told us that people were very surprised that they would “only train to become a bricklayer.” According to the apprentices, bricklaying was not seen as an adequate apprenticeship for those with higher intellectual abilities.

Thomas (interview): “It’s a bit devalued. If somebody asks: ‘What do you do or what do you learn?’ ‘Well, I’m a bricklayer.’ Then people say ‘What, only a bricklayer?’ Something like that. It’s less valued than other vocations.”

Outsiders also often stated that bricklaying is physically demanding work performed in what is often poor weather. Some apprentices reported that others made them aware that bricklaying causes health problems and injuries.

Peter (interview): “When I told my friends, they said I’d injure my back. But you’ll also get a good salary, and this is fine for them. And other people find it good in general, but they all say that bricklaying’s an occupation that uses you up physically.”

There is an important body of literature on dirty work and the physical taint entailed by manual labor, which often leads to occupational stigma or at least low occupational prestige (Simpson et al. 2012). However, our data also shows that this negative image of manual labor is not necessarily all encompassing, but more prominent among particular people and contexts. Some bricklaying apprentices noted that older and rural people often appreciated their apprenticeship, valorized their practical skills and saw positive career possibilities for bricklayers. Younger and urban people more often perceived bricklaying as blue-collar work or manual labor that involves physical dirtiness and requires only basic cognitive skills. Not all apprentices were aware of this generational and regional divide. However, we also observed that the apprentices who felt a stronger lack of recognition of their apprenticeship more often came from urban contexts, where the tertiary sector and white-collar work are much more dominant. The issue of low prestige in the urban context even dominated one focus group: some experienced being shunned when taking the train while wearing their work clothes.

Remarkably, some apprentices (in particular the woman) also evoked the negative image people have of their occupational culture because of the mainly male work environment. They were often perceived as macho – men with sexist attitudes or behavior (e.g. catcalling women) – or crude (e.g. yelling or swearing at colleagues), or as engaging in unrespectable behavior (e.g. drinking beer at the building site).

Unlike bricklaying apprentices, automation technology apprentices reported that most people simply do not know what their occupation consists of, and that they often had to explain it. However, after their explanation – that automation technology has something to do with mechanics, electronics, pneumatics and programming in order to build machines and automated systems – the reaction was generally positive.

More importantly, automation technology was often perceived as an “occupation of the future” that will become more important as its advanced industrial products become more widely used and valued, thus creating more career possibilities for practitioners. The fact that most people did not know what the occupation consists of to some extent empowered the apprentices to describe their work in desirable terms, as the reference to robotics in the following quotation by Celien shows, even though robotics is only a part of automation technology.

Celien (interview): “It’s really cool because of robots. People say: ‘Wow, you make robots, that’s great.’ I think it’s really perceived as an occupation of the future, like IT.”

Nonetheless, occupational prestige was an issue for the apprentices who had gone through the highest compulsory-school track. Half of the automation technology apprentices in our study had been enrolled in this track, and therefore could have continued ordinary schooling to do an A-level, which would have allowed them to enter university directly. However, they chose VET (the reasons are discussed later) and therefore experienced negative reactions from some schoolteachers, peers and even family members who valued academic over vocational education.

Clara, for instance, had to struggle for a long time with her parents, both academics, who wished her to go to university. She succeeded in convincing them that an apprenticeship could be a good qualification, in particular because she was doing an integrated professional A-level. Others, like Manuel, received negative reactions from teachers in compulsory school, who were often unfamiliar with VET because of their own academic background. However, he had support from his parents.

Manuel (interview): “During compulsory schooling, because I already knew halfway through my last year that I wanted to do an apprenticeship, all my teachers told me it was a waste of time and that I shouldn’t do an apprenticeship because it wouldn’t be of any use to me and my talents were better suited for others things.”

In conclusion, bricklaying and automation technology apprentices were concerned with a lack of occupational prestige, although in different ways. While bricklaying was perceived as low-skilled and hard manual labor, automation technology benefited from the vague but valorized image of being an occupation of the future. Clearly, both perceptions are biased, but they demonstrate that the belief in progress through new technologies is stronger than the belief in the future of skilled manual labor. The results also show that university education was valued more highly than a technical apprenticeship, at least among people who had obtained a university degree themselves.

The construction of valuable occupational identities

Both groups of apprentices disagreed with these views of their work and developed other narratives that value their apprenticeship. During the interviews, they employed four dominant identity strategies that implicitly and sometimes explicitly rejected these

negative images. These valorizing narratives were not chosen individually, but were instead embedded in the occupational culture the young people integrated into via their apprenticeship. The young people's agency to resist occupational misrecognition was thus bound to the experiences and discourses available in their learning and working, but also family and friendship, contexts (Evans 2007). Bricklaying and automation technology apprentices differed in their strategies because they were faced with different devaluations. However, the analysis made it possible to develop overarching categories to compare the two apprenticeships and learn more about the challenges occupational prestige raise and the resistance apprentices might develop to construct positive occupational identities, a precondition for remaining engaged in their apprenticeships.

Valorizing manual, practical or dual-apprenticeship programs

The first identity strategy among the bricklaying apprentices was to valorize the practical nature of their work. Most of them were satisfied with having started a manual-labor apprenticeship; they seldom described it as a second choice. They reported pleasure in being physically active, doing concrete things with their hands and working outside at the building site instead of in an office. This discourse also corresponds to their educational milieus: their parents often completed similar apprenticeships and seldom pursued higher education. For most apprentices, obtaining a VET diploma in bricklaying is what was within the realm of the possible, and the diploma was valuable to them and their families.

Some apprentices also used social comparisons – a well-known identity strategy in social psychology (Tajfel and Turner 1986) – to valorize their bricklaying identity. They were proud of “really working” and distanced themselves from people who, according to them, “don't really work,” like their peers in commercial apprenticeships or other trades like electricians, who “think more than they do something.” Similar to what Willis (1981) showed in his seminal study with British “lads” who resisted discourses prioritizing academic education – leading them to leave school and take working-class jobs – these bricklaying apprentices valorized manual over mental labor. However, their identity work was related to the devalorization they had already experienced as workers in a lower-skilled occupation (Moret et al. 2017) and can thus be understood as a valorizing strategy. Some apprentices complained that bricklayers' practical knowledge was sometimes even insufficiently recognized at the building site: other professions, like architects, were not only better paid, but their expertise at the construction site also counted for more than the practical intelligence of bricklayers, even when they seemed to be wrong.

However, these young bricklayers were satisfied with their apprenticeships, also because practical work always had clear aims and visible, tangible results. The interviewees often told us that “You see what you've done after a day” and “You know exactly what you have to do.” Easily seeing the results of their efforts – for example, finishing a new floor – allowed them to find meaning in their work. Some were also proud of the long-lasting effects of construction work because buildings remain standing for decades and construction work results in concrete, lasting experiences:

Jonas (interview): "The vocation is something beautiful. You always see what you've done. Even in 20 years, you'll still know what you did there. You keep pictures in your mind about situations you experienced that were funny or not."

Pride in creating something lasting was accompanied by social distancing from other occupations, mostly through humor. During a focus group, some apprentices made fun of the commercial and sales apprenticeship programs: "What did you do today? I wrote 50 emails. I filled boxes with oranges that were empty again by the end of the day." Relatedly, the young bricklayers also valued construction work because of its usefulness – building houses people live in, thus fulfilling a basic human need.

The apprentices in automation technology valorized the apprenticeship in a different way, because they faced other prejudices. Because many of them had the choice between an apprenticeship and grammar school, they all expressed satisfaction over their choice to enter working life via an apprenticeship. They claimed that they had been bored with many of the subjects in compulsory school, including literature and art history, and were happy to finally specialize in technical subjects they were more interested in. Moreover, they were also happy to not only sit in a classroom, but also be physically active while working, thus echoing the arguments of the bricklaying apprentices. They did not share the view that academic general education is more valuable than vocational technical training; on the contrary, they presented their choice as necessary to finding meaning in learning. Importantly, most of these apprentices' parents had also obtained VET diplomas, sometimes followed by upper vocational training, but rarely by higher academic studies. Some apprentices complained that this valuable occupational choice was not encouraged for students in the highest track of compulsory schooling.

Louis (interview): "That's why it's super cool. [...] My friends who are still in grammar school say that they don't really know why, but think their classes are useless. For me it's different. I clearly see that it's useful for me."

Many were also happy to be integrated into a working context instead of continuing to study among peers and teachers at school. This working context involves working with mostly adult colleagues who already have work experience, and it made them aware of other logics, like the industrial production of machines and the organization of a large company. The apprentices were convinced that they were acquiring knowledge necessary to become mature and fulfill work-world expectations. Thus, they also distanced themselves from apprentices who were learning automation technology only in a VET school without being involved in a training company and a real work environment. In this way, they valorized the dual nature of their training program, which involves learning at both the workplace and school. This valorization also went hand in hand with the belief that their chances of employment were much better than those of automation technologists who were only trained in VET schools and young people who left grammar school with a general A-level but without work experience. They drew on a dominant discourse present in Swiss media and politics that aims to valorize vocational education.

Clara (focus group): "Today everybody wants their kids go to university. Even if it's better to do an apprenticeship because people will then say, 'Ah this person already has [work] experience because of the apprenticeship. We will choose this person over that one who did four years of schooling and got the same certificate.'"

However, these young people did not only deconstruct the prestige hierarchies they experienced from outside. They also struggled over internal prestige hierarchies with regard to the quality of the training provided by their companies. The young people often negotiated, and sometimes struggled, with each other over which companies prepared them best for their professional future. In one VET class, a conflict emerged between one apprentice who showed pride in working for a large company with a training center and another who accused him being a "slacker who doesn't know how to really work." In this way, these two apprentices reproduced within the dual-apprenticeship program the division between studying and working they experienced from outsiders. Remarkably, such competition remained limited to the automation apprentices, probably because they were much more concerned than the bricklaying apprentices with maximizing their chances for their professional future, but also because they had more options with their advanced compulsory-school diplomas.

Valorizing advanced occupational skills

Another strategy these young people employed to valorize their apprenticeships was to emphasize the advanced skills their occupation requires. The bricklaying apprentices faced the view that bricklaying mainly requires the ability to work hard and manual skills. Thus, they engaged in two types of narratives to nuance this societal perception and emphasized other important, underestimated occupational skills.

First, the apprentices argued that bricklaying involves important cognitive abilities, attitudes and manual skills, and not just the ability to work hard. Many of the apprentices spoke about their occupation as a craft involving a large range of manual work activities (e.g. making concrete forms, putting up walls, reinforcing concrete) and accompanying mental attitudes, like being patient, accurate and careful when doing precision work (e.g. making fair-faced concrete, making measurements). This trade also required a strongminded character to do physical work in difficult weather. Some of the apprentices even told us that their own initial image of bricklaying as predominantly involving hard labor had changed. This young woman gave a convincing account:

Marina (interview): "Before I started, I thought you didn't have to be very intelligent or know a lot of stuff as a bricklayer. If you're asked to do something, you'll just do it and that's it. I also thought that they were rough, and sexist, the big stereotypes about bricklayers. Later, when I became more interested in it, when I started doing an internship as a bricklayer, after a few days at the company, this view completely changed. No, bricklayers aren't rough; they're human beings like everyone else. Yes, for sure, sometimes they're rough, but they also know how to be careful and friendly. Yes, a bricklayer has to be careful."

A second related narrative was that bricklayers should not be considered to have low cognitive abilities. On the contrary, they argued, bricklayers have to be intelligent and clever to learn and execute the trade. The apprentices especially valorized the mathematical abilities and spatial perception required to plan construction work, and the logical thinking required to understand, for instance, the role of particular work activities in the work process as a whole.

Yannick (interview): "I think you can't think that this occupation is for people who don't know anything or who have difficulties. No, it's an occupation where you have to know math, calculate for instance how much water you need to make mortar or concrete. You can't think you only have to do what you're told; there are a lot of other things to do."

To conclude, the bricklaying apprentices did not perceive their occupation as low skilled; instead, they took pride in learning the different skills involved in the trade and becoming a bricklayer.

In contrast, the automation technology apprentices did not struggle to have their advanced occupational skills recognized. This difference can be explained by the fact that other people do not question the status of a highly qualified apprenticeship. Nevertheless, they were aware of their advanced occupational skills, and when asked what abilities or skills the apprenticeship or the work requires, they stated them clearly, but without being defensive.

These apprentices often emphasized two main higher skills: mathematical ability, because the school lessons often consisted of calculations and formula transformations; and the ability to think logically, because practitioners have to read plans and then build machines, or program automated systems that have to meet safety standards. As well, companies strongly rely on entry tests to ensure that apprentices fulfil these basic requirements.

Moreover, the apprentices also often reported that it was important to do their homework regularly, catch up on missed lessons and review lessons, because otherwise they could easily become lost – something that bricklayers rarely mentioned. Indeed, automation technology apprentices encountered many different disciplines (electrical engineering, electricity, pneumatics, mechanics, mathematics, industrial drawing, industry schemata, programming, etc.), each with a specific technical language that had to be learned. Thus, the apprentices emphasized that it is impossible to complete the apprenticeship successfully if one is not motivated to learn and really understand.

Lauren (interview): "I think the apprenticeship is really hard. All these disciplines we have, this diversity, etc. There's a lot of stuff to learn. If we don't really want to understand it – if we simply say I'm going into this occupation because I want to – if we don't really want to understand what's behind all these things, how they're related and why, it won't work out."

Although the apprentices described their apprenticeship as advanced, they also perceived it as achievable if one was determined to learn. The knowledge that they were learning about advanced disciplines and coming to understand complicated processes that others did not necessarily understand also made the apprentices proud. Although

two classmates fooled around during classroom observation, they also regularly congratulated each other and referred to themselves as engineers after successfully completing an exercise.

Valorizing the variety of work tasks or the holistic approach to the occupation

The bricklaying apprentices also valorized the variety of work involved. In addition to bricklaying, apprentices did several kinds of construction activities that involve or make use of concrete, like reinforcing concrete, making or removing concrete forms and building walls with different types of stone. They were involved in new construction or reconstruction and were present from the beginning to the end of a construction project, which might be an apartment building, family home, bridge, public space or garden. The apprentices developed valorizing narratives around this diversity and even considered it a mark of social distinction compared to other occupations. They described it as an important characteristic of their workdays that motivated them to engage in their training.

Jonas (interview): "It's varied, compared to a plasterer, he does the same things all day. I couldn't do that and for sure would leave after ten weeks. In our [trade], there are so many different things. You rarely do the same things."

The apprentices in automation technology described their apprenticeship in similar terms. They referred to the variety of work tasks in equally positive terms, in this case in regard to the different technical disciplines involved in automation technology. However, they were not only positive about that diversity because working on different tasks or machines is less boring. Much more than the bricklaying apprentices, they were aware that this variety meant they were being trained in an occupation that is conceived holistically, allowing them to work on technical projects from beginning to end.

Alexandre (interview): "Often, if people don't know what automation technology involves, I say that it's a really varied occupation. Your work involves mechanics, electricity, air, and I know how to program an automated system. The objective of an automation technologist is to build a machine from start to finish."

This holistic occupational approach enabled these apprentices to complete complex technical projects on their own, which gave them a sense of pride. The apprentices also believed that the holistic design of the apprenticeship allowed them to become more specialized later, according to the needs of the labor market or their interests.

Lauren (focus group): "You have to warm up, but it's interesting. Maybe these four years [of training] are difficult. But at least we see a lot of different things compared to a specialization, like a multi-skilled mechanic. We really come into contact with a lot of things, mechanics. As an electronics technician, you only do electronics. We really see a complete arsenal and afterwards, and this is the really interesting thing about having a certificate as an automation technologist, [...] we can specialize more in electronics or mechanics according to what we like."

Valorizing promising career prospects

A final strategy was to valorize the apprenticeship via the career options it makes possible. A large majority of bricklaying apprentices saw their future within bricklaying and construction work. Although the apprentices described occupational prestige as rather low, they perceived the working conditions and career possibilities positively and as compensating for the lack of social recognition.

Indeed, the construction sector offers many employment possibilities with good working conditions and relatively high salaries. For instance, there are several additional professional training programs, such as machine or crane operator, but the apprentices were especially interested in higher professional training programs, like those for foreman or master builder. The apprentices often told us that they chose the apprenticeship from the beginning because of these higher career opportunities. It is also possible to pursue university studies in the domain of construction, like civil engineering or architecture, although very few apprentices aspired to do so.

Raoul (interview): "If I continue as a bricklayer then I'll definitely continue training. [...] I think I'll become a foreman. That's what I'm planning."

These higher career possibilities were so important to the apprentice bricklayers included in this study because they knew that they were unlikely to continue working as bricklayers until they retired. They were convinced that this work would eventually become too physically demanding and that they would have to reduce the manual-labor aspects of their work and do more office work, like planning or managing. Importantly, the trade association that represents bricklayers' employers promotes the apprenticeship with these higher career possibilities, which are indeed within reach. Although the construction sector heavily draws on unskilled manual labor, the apprenticeship program trains a qualified workforce able to continue upper vocational training.

Automation technology apprentices also valorized the career options their apprenticeship made possible, which was also often why they had chosen this apprenticeship program. They foresaw entering different industrial fields and becoming more specialized. They were also aware of the possibility of completing further training, becoming an engineer or attending university, including a prestigious polytechnic university. Unlike the bricklayers, however, a considerable number of apprentices were not considering moving up, but instead foresaw themselves continuing to work as automation technologists. In other words, the apprenticeship was not mainly perceived as a stepping-stone to higher employment positions, but attractive in its own right, in particular because of its already attractive employment possibilities.

Yannick (interview): "At the beginning, I thought I'd do an apprenticeship with an integrated professional A-level, which I'm doing, and then start studying engineering right away. But later, as the apprenticeship went on, I realized that becoming an engineer isn't necessarily something I want to do right now. Now I want to become an employee at the company I already work at, become an external operator and visit other countries, go to clients abroad, build machines. I've never done that, but I think I'd like it."

The apprentices also valued the occupation so highly because they believed it will become increasingly important. They were convinced that the machines and automated systems they built – for example, train-ticket and beverage dispensers, elevators and escalators and robotics – will become ubiquitous, and that they will benefit from secure and promising employment positions in the industrial sector. Remarkably, some apprentices in bigger international companies had already experienced the dislocation of industry to cheaper countries. Nevertheless, this glamorous occupational image remained dominant among the newer apprentices, although less so among the more advanced ones.

Conclusion

This study with bricklaying and automation technology apprentices provides nuance to the simplified, positive picture of the Swiss VET system often offered by the media and politics. These young people face the academic-vocational divide that informs the prestige of their apprenticeships, resulting in a lack of recognition of and threat to their occupational identities. The bricklaying apprentices felt that their occupation is inaccurately believed to involve only manual (and not mental) skills and rough (and not skilled) work. The negative reactions these apprentices received from outsiders mirror the recruitment problems faced by construction companies. The automation technology apprentices experienced higher occupational prestige: the technical apprenticeship is accorded a promising future in the digital era. However, people who are mainly familiar with academic education continue to devalue apprenticeship programs in general. In Switzerland, it has been possible to do a professional A-level during VET since the 1980s, and automation technology apprentices often take advantage of this possibility to pursue higher studies, but the vocational-academic divide persists.

However, the apprentices are active agents (Colley et al. 2003), and they develop strategies to help them enhance their status and identities. These strategies are not arbitrarily or individually developed (Simpson et al. 2012; Evans 2007), but instead are deeply embedded within the wider economic and educational context in which apprentices are socialized and that also generates the devaluation or valuation of their occupational identities. Bricklaying apprentices – situated in an increasingly service-based economy – valued their practical intelligence and the meaning they found in their trade. Among automation technology apprentices, an additional narrative was that their apprenticeship offered them better labor-market opportunities in a society where youth with higher cognitive abilities tend to pursue academic education. Both groups of apprentices drew on dominant public discourses to reverse the academic-vocational divide and the related prestige ranking.

Moreover, the bricklaying apprentices valorized advanced occupational skills that outsiders are often unaware of. The automation technology apprentices also referred to their higher occupational skills, but in this way confirmed their status and reproduced divisions between vocational programs. Both groups of apprentices engaged in another identity strategy: they valorized the variety of work tasks. The automation technology apprentices drew on more elaborate narratives in this regard, probably because they need such strong narratives to legitimate their hybrid position vis-à-vis the many specialized technical apprenticeships.

Regarding future career possibilities, the bricklaying apprentices in particular valued the possibilities for professional promotion through further training after their

apprenticeship, while the automation technology apprentices more often identified with the occupational position offered by the apprenticeship. The bricklaying apprentices perceived their apprenticeship mainly as a stepping-stone not only because of the low prestige of their occupation, but also because of its work conditions: the physical labor involved makes it difficult to work as a bricklayer until retirement. Retail apprentices also consider their apprenticeship a stepping-stone because of the flexible work hours and low salaries associated with their occupation (Duemmler and Caprani 2018).

Finally, our study on the occupational prestige of apprenticeships confirms and develops current theories and research that understand that occupational prestige is not simply a result of given occupations' objective superiority or inferiority. Rather, prestige is a social construction to which different actors contribute depending on their own rationales and interests while selectively drawing on the occupations' objective criteria in order to defend their own status. The prestige accorded to occupations thus depends on the social position that individuals occupy in the work world. Thus, not everybody agrees on the prestige of occupations, and individuals negotiate or contest prestige in their everyday lives. Most quantitative research on occupational prestige neglects this aspect because it mainly relies on average prestige-ranking scores and is thus blind to the social struggles that are involved in the ranking of occupational prestige.

Our study also demonstrates that prestige not only plays a role when an individual makes a career choice and begins an apprenticeship (Eberhard et al. 2009), but remains crucial for the individual's successful engagement during their apprenticeship and into the future. Apprentices need narratives to construct positive occupational identities. Our findings thus also suggest ideas for practitioners (e.g. promoters, recruiters, teachers, trainers) concerned by the valuation of apprenticeship programs. These practitioners could, for instance, support apprentices' narratives to promote the development of positive collective occupational identities. For example, young bricklayers could be encouraged to be prouder of learning an all-encompassing trade that enables them to participate in construction projects from beginning (e.g. foundations) to end (e.g. fair-faced concrete). Campaigns addressing the wider public could also promote the image of the apprenticeship programs that are perceived negatively or simply misunderstood.

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