

## Careers of the Professoriate



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# Careers of the Professoriate

Academic Pathways of the Linguists  
and Sociologists in Germany, France and the UK

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## Introduction: Studying the Professoriate

**Abstract** A professorship is a career goal for many academics. Yet little is known about who becomes a professor and how. We propose an empirical, socio-historical study of the professoriate as a group that comprises all professors of linguistics and sociology in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. Drawing on online biographical presentations, our study responds to a demand for a systematic investigation of how professorial careers are constructed over time.

**Keywords** Professoriate • Comparative research • Empirical research • Online curriculum vitae

Universities around the world are centred on their senior members, the professors. Professors are the institutionally recognised members of their scientific communities. They are not only qualified to take leading roles in teaching and management but, through their research, they also represent a disciplinary area. A professorship normally comes along with a well-paid and secure position in a higher education institution, at least in most European countries.

The image of the professor has been surrounded by desires, fantasies and myths that have been disseminated and reinforced in popular culture. Think of the professor as an absent-minded creator of gadgets (Professor Calculus in *The Adventures of Tintin*, 1991), as a socially awkward crank

(*The Nutty Professor*, 1996), as a mad genius (*Flubber*, 1997), as a sombre figure of authority (*Harry Potter*, 2001), a sly mastermind (*The Ladykillers*, 2004) or a victim of absurd academic technocrats (*The Chair*, 2021). Sociology professors (*Der Campus*, 1998) and linguistics professors (*The Arrival*, 2016), who we deal with in this study, have also been the object of popular representations. Such portrayals often have little to do with the realities of academic life. Yet they convey tacit and widely shared assumptions about professors that need to be critically interrogated.

First, the assumption that professors are superior to others because they are smart. Academics may be said to have talents, skills and capacities that make them stand out. But do academics move up because of their (scientific) intelligence? We will not repeat the criticism from social theorists that has been directed against the idea of education as a meritocratic institution that rewards effort and talent (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1984; Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Goldthorpe, 1996). There is strong evidence about the role of class in academic mobility that puts a big question mark behind the idea that professional success reflects individual academic achievements.

Second, the assumption that professors are lonely thinkers. Folk representations of professors are often centred on individual academics as if they were free from social constraints: the professor as an individual on a rendez-vous with Truth. The reality may be a lot more social but the ideal of the individual thinker also pervades many disciplinary fields, especially in the humanities and social sciences, where laboratory work is rare and publications are often written and signed by individuals. Yet it is easy to forget about the many ties with and debts to peers, their institutional obligations and commitments, the role of teams and students. Academics cannot take their social standing in the community for granted and they often go to great lengths to build up a unique profile and to be recognised as authors of important new ideas.

Thirdly, the assumption that professorial authority knows no history. Academics are sometimes cited as sources of timeless truths with few reminders of the constructed and antagonistic nature of scientific facts, especially in public debates where academics intervene as experts. They themselves are aware of the contingent character of the social and historical place from where they speak. Who speaks is crucially important in any scientific debate. Yet the person usually does not become a topic, and even less so how one has become one. Academics occupy positions in an intellectual landscape from where they make their claims but these positions do not appear in all their dynamism and complexity. There is a tendency,

therefore, to erase the people and their backgrounds behind abstract academic discourses that conceal the ongoing mobility of academics.

Little is known about the academic profession as a whole. Existing research on professors often builds on anecdotal evidence from individuals. Biographies typically deal with the “great men” of a discipline and homage is paid to distinguished academics after their death (Hamann, 2016). This is a problem since professors are a group of professionals who share backgrounds and experiences; they work under similar conditions and their practices follow certain norms and rules. If we want to account for academics, we need to understand them as a socio-historically structured and situated population.

The sociology of science has long been interested in the emergence of groups and clusters of academics in order to account for new fields, schools or paradigms (Ben-David, 1977; Kuhn, 1968; Mulkay, 1977). Such research tends to be based on historical and archival work on a few but highly visible academics. All too often, evidence remains anecdotal, often centred on individual examples and histories. Outstanding cases rather than the regular ones inform assumptions about how academics advance. Biographical events are an effect of structural mechanisms, but in the sector they are perceived as individual achievements or failures.

There was an estimated number of 25,000 to 40,000 higher education institutions worldwide with around 12.5 million academic teaching staff in 2014 (Our world in data). The European Union alone counted around 1.89 million researchers in 2020 with Germany, France and the United Kingdom (UK) being by far the largest providers in European countries in terms of academic workforce size (Eurostat). In 2018, there were roughly a total of 89,000 professors in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt), France (Kabla-Langlois, 2021) and the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency).

The professoriate comprises the members of an academic system in a discipline who have spent years and decades as students, postdocs and non-professorial academics, moving from position to position, sometimes from institution to institution and, in a minority of cases, from system to system. Titles, roles and positions have different names in different academic systems. Yet the term *professor* (or a close equivalent) is a standard designation for senior academics who are institutionally fully recognised all over the world. Academics with professorial status usually carry the title of *Professor* in English and *Professor or Professorin* (or *ProfessorIn*) in German whereas in French they are called *professeur.e.s (des universités)* in order to distinguish them from secondary teachers, who are called

*professeur.e.s (du secondaire*, a similar distinction is made in Spanish between *catedráticox* and *maestrx/profesorx*). Oftentimes, the precise rank of the academic is specified with a prefix. An American professor, for instance, can be an Assistant, Associate or a Full Professor. Some UK universities now apply the American system: Lecturers have been renamed *Assistant Professors* and Senior Lecturers (as well as Readers) are now *Associate Professors*. Since the introduction of *JuniorprofessorInnen* (W1) in 2002 (Zimmer, 2018), Germany, too, has three professorial ranks: *JuniorprofessorIn* (W1), W2(C3) and W3(C4) professors, the latter corresponding to a chair (*Lehrstuhl*). Professors are sometimes understood to comprise all full academics. Accordingly, Hermanowicz (2018, p. 242f.) defines professors “by a constellation of teaching, research, and service roles as part of their central occupation” and by their being “socially understood as the core academic staff in a given nation’s system of higher education”. We prefer to restrict our understanding to full professors, which includes all professors in the UK, W2 and W3 professors in Germany as well as other permanent academics with professorial status but not W1 *JuniorprofessorInnen* and, finally, in France the *professeur.e.s d’universités* and their counterparts in other institutions.

Professors are those academics who have managed to be selected and move up over time from a large group of academic staff. To account for the professoriate, we have chosen a radically longitudinal approach that can reflect the variety of qualification, recruitment and promotion practices across institutions and national systems. Academic systems suggest certain pathways towards professorship, which typically include at least a doctorate followed by a few years of employment as teacher-researcher.

Taking into account the lack of knowledge about career patterns of entire populations of academics, this book tackles the professoriate as an empirical, socio-historical object. We investigate the biographies of all academics in sociology and linguistics with senior (professorial) status in Germany, France and the UK as they appeared online in 2015. Institutions and ministries usually do not make available lists of professors with CVs and research areas. However, the large majority of senior academics today have professional and/or personal web pages that present their status, biographical information, research areas and publications. The DISCONEX team went through the institutional pages from all higher education institutions in the three countries to identify the members of the professoriate



in the two disciplines and the three countries. We took the biographical information from their online CVs and coded it so as to make cross-institutional analysis possible.

By applying sequence analysis and other multivariate statistical methods to the resulting database, we are able to extract and account for career patterns in a comparative perspective across disciplines and countries.

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