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Monographic Section

## «You've Got to Do This like a Professional – Not like One of These Scratchers!». Reconstructing the Professional Self-Understanding of Tattoo Artists

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**Abstract.** This article investigates the professional self-understanding of tattoo artists, an occupational group that has been expanding rapidly in recent years. Despite ongoing discussions on health and safety risks, tattooing does still not require a recognised licence in most European countries. Tattooists respond to public prejudices concerning their potentially dangerous work practices by referring to their responsibility towards clients and the complexity of their work, which qualify them as professionals. In narrative interviews, tattooists stress that the high standards of artistic quality, craft skills and service orientation, which their customers expect, require their individual professionalisation. Their accounts reveal their notions of professionalism and the rhetorical strategies of boundary work, which they employ to construct their professional identity. The study provides an example of how the practitioners of a non-regulated professional group, whose work has been considered as unskilled and even deviant, adopt and interpret the concept of professionalism to legitimise their status as professionals.

**Keywords.** Tattoo artists; professionalism; professional identity; biography; qualitative research; professionalisation.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty years, the number of tattooists has been growing continuously, and tattoo parlours have sprouted like mushrooms in cities, towns and even in the country-side. Induced by the cultural change, which developed in Western societies from the 1980s and which is in social and cultural science known as the *body turn* (see Ghigi, Sassatelli 2018; Gugutzer 2006; Turner 1992), getting tattooed has become increasingly popular among people of all ages, social positions and milieus. As a result of the tattoo boom, tattooing has turned into an attractive and lucrative job

opportunity. This has led not only to more people taking up the craft, but also profoundly changed tattooing as an occupation and made it more competitive.

With the popularity of tattoos, concerns about safety and health risks have generated endless discussions and criticism of the non-regulated work practices of tattooists, but also initiatives to inform on tattooing. An example is a website<sup>1</sup> for consumers, launched by the German Department of Health, Environment and Consumer Protection, which not only provides all-round information on tattoos, the tattooing procedure and aftercare but also the strong recommendation to choose only a “professional tattoo artist”. Likewise, the German Tattoo Association<sup>2</sup>, which was founded in 1995, introduces itself on the internet as an organisation of “professional” tattoo artists. At their third Tattoo Conference, which the association hosted together with dermatologists, physicians, chemists and psychologists at the University Hospital of Bochum in February 2017, one of the panels was titled *The Professionalization of the Tattoo*<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, professionalism is an omnipresent category on studio websites of individual tattoo artists, who advertise their work as “professional”<sup>4</sup> to distinguish themselves from those, who just “have a go” and are “inking”<sup>5</sup> with cheap and uncertified tattooing sets from untraceable sources on the internet. On the meso level, the tattooing scene responded with various strategies such as founding associations for professional cooperation and representation<sup>6</sup> and establishing collaboration with other professionals such as physicians, lawyers and politicians<sup>7</sup>, but first and foremost by being visible in the media and presenting themselves as professionals. Since in most European countries there is no formal vocational training and practitioners do not need a recognised licence, their credibility and service quality are permanently in the crossfire. Therefore, the tattooists’ fight against prejudices and their self-presentation as a professional and safety-conscious occupational group has been one of the key issues over recent years. Furthermore, even though the present tattoo boom has led to more tolerance and acceptance towards the practice of tattooing, the occupation itself is still often associated with working class and/or rebellious and deviant subcultures (see Atkinson 2003; De Mello 2000) – stereotypes, which many tattooists seek to challenge.

However, since institutionalised capital (Bourdieu 1983) and working in an acknowledged profession are crucial aspects of a person’s personal and social identity, because they determine one’s status and social position (Hughes 1958), the occupational situation outlined above raises the question of the professional self-understanding of tattoo artists: what does professionalism mean in their everyday practice? And how do they interpret and translate and employ the concept for themselves? In other words, what constitutes their professional identity?

To address these questions, I have structured my article as follows. After a brief description of tattooing as a profession, I introduce professionalism, professionalisation and professional identity as interrelated categories, which provide the theoretical framework for my analysis of the empirical data I collected for my PhD project between 2014 and 2017<sup>8</sup>. Subsequently, the research method and the composition of the sample are detailed. Then follows the analysis of interview passages, which concentrates on the reconstruction of the respondent’s notions of professionalism and the concept’s impact on their construction of a professional identity. Furthermore, their individual professionalisation is considered in terms of their self-understanding as professionals.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.safer-tattoo.de> (2018, February 1<sup>st</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> Deutsche Organisierte Tätowierer e.V.: <https://www.dot-cv.de/> (2018, May 25<sup>th</sup>). Bundesverband Tattoo e.V.: <http://www.bundesverband-tattoo.de/> (2018, May 23<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>3</sup> Tattoo-Tagung Bochum 2017: <http://tattoo-tagung.de/> (2018, May 25<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the most famous German tattoo artists already referred to himself as «Christian Warlich. Professional Electric Tattoo Artist», on his business card (Schönfeldt 1960: 63).

<sup>5</sup> Idiom for “to tattoo”.

<sup>6</sup> An example is the German Tattoo Association and German Tattoo Union e.V.: <https://www.dot-cv.de/> (2018, May 23<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>7</sup> Meeting of Daniel Krause, Associate of the Bundesverband-Tattoo.de and Christian Schmidt, Ministry for Food and Agriculture in August 2016: [https://www.taetowiermagazin.de/szene/kommt+die+berufsausbildung+fuer+taetowierer\\_168.html](https://www.taetowiermagazin.de/szene/kommt+die+berufsausbildung+fuer+taetowierer_168.html) (2018, June 15<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>8</sup> PhD project, *Tattooing as Paid Labour. Between Occupation and Vocation*, at the Institute of Sociology, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen Nürnberg.

## TATTOOING AS GAINFUL WORK

In 1960, the German dermatologist Walter Schönfeldt (1960) stated that in no European country tattooing was recognised as a “profession”<sup>9</sup>, referring to the fact that no formalised training or education existed. Not much has changed since then although nowadays many people consider tattooing as a “somewhat” professional occupation. Drawing on the definition of the German constitutional law<sup>10</sup>, which defines a profession as an occupation, which someone practises for a “longer period of time”<sup>11</sup> and provides his/her main income, tattooing counts as a profession.

Tattooing, one of mankind’s earliest aesthetic practices, developed as an occupation during the tattoo boom of the Nineteenth century (see Oettermann 1979; Jung 2007). From the Seventeenth century onwards “tatuages” or “tataus”<sup>12</sup> – the exotic body decoration of the natives in the Far East, Polynesia and New Zealand - had been introduced to Europe by sailors, adventurers and traders, who returned from their expeditions with tattoos. Although tattooing had been practised in Europe before (Oettermann 1979)<sup>13</sup>, the seamen’s strange and mystical decoration evoked enthusiasm and tattoos became fashionable as an aesthetic expression of individuality, popular across all social classes (Petermann 1993). With this tattoo boom, tattooing developed from a side-line job into a gainful full-time occupation and tattooists began to offer their bodywork in tattoo rooms and bars or opened shops. From the 1850s onwards, most harbour cities – among them, San Francisco, Tokyo, New York, Liverpool and Hamburg, to name but a few (Heinzl, Pinkl 2003), had well-frequented tattoo parlours. «The first documented professional tattooist in Britain was Sutherland Macdonald, who operated out of a salon in London beginning in 1894» (Clark 2016). In the 1890s, the invention of the tattooing machine, which advanced and facilitated the tattooing procedure considerably, drew a growing number of people to tattooing as gainful work (Schönfeldt 1960). However, by the beginning of World War I, the tattoo fashion had receded, and tattoo studios disappeared from city centres and tattooing only “survived” in some marginalised subcultures (e.g. bikers, rockers, Punks) and among the working poor. Throughout most of the Twentieth century, getting tattooed was associated with rebellious and even deviant behaviour and being tattooed marked you as an outsider (Pullen, Simpson 2018). This changed strikingly during the 1980s, when the individualisation of all realms of life (Beck 1986) led to a new perception of the body as a means of self-presentation and expression of identity. In this context, techniques of “body modification” (see Featherstone 2000; Kasten 2006) became increasingly popular in all social milieus and tattoos were no longer seen as subcultural markers but as fashionable beauty and/or identity symbols, which turned tattooing into a mass phenomenon<sup>14</sup> (see De Mello 2000; Atkinson 2004; Fisher 2002). This brought about two developments: firstly, tattooed people and tattoo artists began to be more tolerated and secondly, the growing demand turned tattooing into an attractive job with lucrative income prospects. Supply materials – until then, only available for those who had contacts in the tattooing scene<sup>15</sup> – were suddenly offered on the internet and imported very cheaply from China. When TV formats such as L.A. Ink and Miami Ink<sup>16</sup> began to portray tattoo artists and their way of working

<sup>9</sup> The English translation for the German term “Beruf” is “profession”. A “Beruf” refers to the occupation someone is trained for, and/or provides his/her main income for a longer period of time.

<sup>10</sup> BVerfGE 7, 377, 397: Beruf iSv Art. 12 I GG ist jede auf Dauer angelegte, der Schaffung und Erhaltung einer Lebensgrundlage dienende, Betätigung anzusehen, die nicht schlechthin gemeinschädlich ist. (vgl. BVerfGE 7, 377 (397)); v. Münch/Kunig/Gubelt, Art. 12 Rn. 8 (<https://www.jurawiki.de/DefinitionBeruf>, 2018, November 16<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sowi-online.de/node/431#uebl> (2018, November 29<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>12</sup> “Tatau” is a Polynesian verb and means “to knock”, “to pound” (see Jung 2007; Heinzl, Pinkl 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Examples are the crusader’s Jerusalem tattoos. Tattoos were common as markers for family and/or tribal rank, status, religious or social position. Furthermore, tattooing was applied as a stigmatization and punishment (cf. Heinzl, Pinkl 2003).

<sup>14</sup> According to the so far largest study on *Tattooing and Piercing* in Germany, which was published by the University of Leipzig in October 2017, every fifth German has got one or more tattoos. <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/service/kommunikation/medienredaktion/nachrichten.html> (2018, April 8<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>15</sup> Information from interview respondents, who have been tattooing for more than twenty years.

<sup>16</sup> TV formats: Miami Ink on TLC from 2005-2008, and L.A. Ink on TLC from 2007-2011. <http://www.highvoltagetattoo.com/#artists-front> (2018, June 10<sup>th</sup>).

in a reality show, some of them even became celebrities. However, despite this attention from the public and the media, in most countries, tattooists continue to work without a licence or a registration. In Germany, for example, tattooists work without any formal education or training and consequently without recognised credentials, which means that the term is not legally protected, and anyone can call him/herself a tattoo artist. The purchase of a trade licence legitimises to open a tattoo studio, which is then registered and regularly checked for hygiene and safety by local health authorities, but a first aid certificate is not obligatory.<sup>17</sup> This is insofar remarkable as during the tattooing procedure quite serious problems such as skin irritation, excessive bleeding and nausea can occur. Interestingly, from the perspective of insurance law tattooing counts as “physical injury by agreement”<sup>18</sup>.

## PROFESSIONALISM, PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

In recent years, numerous studies have examined professionalism as an attractive value and ideology (Evetts 2013), as a discursive formation (Adams 2012) and as a disciplinary mechanism (Fournier 1999) in a variety of occupations. The body of research includes the impact of the concept on occupations in the art and culture sector (Svensson 2015), knowledge and service work (Maestriperi 2016), care and bodywork (Black 2004; Sanders, Vail 2009) and even volunteer work (Nittel, Seltrecht 2008). This research shows that professionalism is no longer primarily used as a set of criteria to distinguish professions from other occupations, but has become a flexible category to analyse the organisation of knowledge and work skills of other occupational groups (Evetts 2003), particularly, as many of them are striving for the recognition and status of a profession (Dewe, Stüwe 2016). However, the fact that «secretaries, restaurant staff, security personnel, furniture retailers (among others) are all allegedly offering “professional services”» (Fournier 1999: 281) also leads to the question whether professionalism has been changed into a marketing strategy or is just an empty label. Fournier denies the question and explains professionalism referring to Foucault’s (1978) concept of “governmentality” as an appealing “discursive resource” that leads to the construction of «appropriate work identities and conducts» (Fournier 1999: 284 ff.). Freidson (2001) describes professionalism as a mode of working and identifies it as a “third logic” beside the logics of the market and the organization. From an interactionist perspective, professionalism generally refers to the quality of front-line service work (Frenkel *et alii* 1999) and is the result of an interaction, where the professional actor solves a given problem with his field-specific competences and skills (Nittel 2002). The application of «somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases» (Abbott 1988: 8) is often characterised by complexity and “irreducible uncertainty”, as Champy (2018) points out, since the practitioner who works with patients, students or clients can never predict the outcome of his/her action for certain. According to him, dealing with the specifics of individual cases requires the professional’s “practical wisdom” and the way they accomplish this challenge should be one of the critical issues of the sociology of the professions.

The attribute “professionalism” is always associated with a skilled performance of competences and expertise, which explains the omnipresence and the frequent usage of the term in everyday contexts (Pfadenhauer 2005). Particularly in occupational contexts, it is essential to convince the patient or client that the professional’s decision, treatment and/or judgement is correct and the best (Hughes 1958). According to Fournier (1999), this credit of trust contributes to the appeal of professionalism as a value for nearly all occupational groups (Pfadenhauer 2005). In the field of body and beauty service work, where vocational training programmes and qualifications are rare, it is challenging to convey trustworthiness and expertise (Liebold *et alii* 2018). Therefore, the successful practitioner requires a coherent professional identity, since the «attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences» the «professional self-concept is based on» (Slay, Smith 2011: 86) frame the professional context and influence the self-perception and actions of the service provider (Schmidt 2012). Without institutional or organisational regulations and role models, professional identities are constructed through interaction and actively working (Pratt *et*

<sup>17</sup> Information from a public health authority during an expert interview, in March 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft: <https://www.safer-tattoo.de/sichergehen.html> (2018, April 29<sup>th</sup>).

*alii* 2006). Processes of professionalisation, defined as the accumulating and systemising of knowledge and practical skills in a specific area (Kalkowski 2012), do no longer really follow the pattern, which Wilensky identified as an overall “model” in his famous article: *The Professionalization of Everyone?* (1964). Therefore, «doing [s.th.] full time» (ibid.: 142) and identifying oneself with a body of professional knowledge remain core aspects of the process that follows miscellaneous pathways nowadays. Nevertheless, despite this flexibility of sequences occupations continue to strive for social acknowledgement and «legal recognition» (Maestriperi 2016: 34) and professionalising oneself and eventually achieving certified qualifications count as essential aspects in modern societies (ibid.: 35).

The diverse forms and paths of professionalisation can be classified as two dimensions: the “collective” and the “individual” professionalisation (Mieg 2016), which are interrelated. Any collective professionalisation refers to the process by which a professional group tries to achieve public and political recognition and institutionalisation, whereas the individualised process consists of the «role-making» (Nittel 2004: 348), and is defined as «[...] the education, training and maturation of an individual that is not necessarily academic, but still leads to a status, to professional practise and a self-image, which derives from it» (Nittel, Seltrecht 2008: 134). Usually, this process begins with an initial interest and the motivation to learn more about it, which is followed by a period of studying and the accumulation of professional knowledge and practical skills (Nittel 2004). Eventually, this process leads to the development of a professional identity and habitus.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE

The empirical material of this research project consists of two kinds of data. Between 2014 and 2017, I conducted twenty-six biographical narrative interviews with male and female tattoo artists and two expert interviews with a lawyer and a health official for my PhD project. The verbal data has been complemented with material from participant observation at four tattoo conventions, two in big cities and two in smaller towns in Germany, which includes visual material such as brochures and photographs plus ethnographic notes on tattooing procedures in situ, tattoo contests, background music etc.

The data collection began at a tattoo convention, where informal conversations with tattooists at their exhibition stands led eventually to appointments for narrative interviews. Concurrently, the focused search for studio websites and blogs on the internet helped to find interviewees thus facilitating a theoretical sampling (Glaser, Strauss 1978) since most tattoo artists introduce themselves with some biographical information on their studio homepages. Also, experts such as board members and lawyers of tattoo associations were found via the internet and contacted per email or by phone. The interviewees were aged between 23 and 48, and their work experience ranged from one and a half to almost thirty years at the time of the interview. The sample includes men, women, one transgender person with different social backgrounds and educational achievement, as well as various nationalities<sup>19</sup>.

The narrative interviews with tattooists provide their perspective on their working career, biographical resources and work experiences, which influenced and shaped their self-framing and professional self-understanding. What and how they choose to narrate from their work as tattooists is instructive for a reconstruction of their ideas on professional conduct, work practices and thus eventually the construction of their professional identity (Bohnsack 2008; Nohl 2006). Visits to tattoo parlours and attendance at conventions provide an opportunity to study how tattooists perform, translate and implement their understanding of professionalism while working. Watching tattooing procedures in situ reveals professional practices and routines, which are accomplished through tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958) and therefore not necessarily described in an interview. Furthermore, being present during client consultations and tattooing sessions helps to understand what professional conduct consists of in routines of service work, usage of equipment and in interaction with customers and colleagues.

The data has been analysed with the documentary method (Garfinkel 1967), which Bohnsack (2008) developed for group discussions and visual material and was further elaborated for the interpretation of interviews by

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<sup>19</sup> The interviewees come from the United Kingdom, Russia, Croatia, Slovakia, Italy, Austria, the US, and Germany.

Nohl (2009). As an interpretative paradigm verbal statements, as well as visual data (e.g. ethnographic observations), are considered as documents, which allow the reconstruction of interpretative frames, self-theoretical concepts and orientations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the article focuses on the interviewed tattoo artists' perspective on their work and aims to reconstruct aspects of their professional self-understanding. In their accounts the tattooists describe their motives for working as full-time tattoo artists, the quest to find someone and somewhere for an apprenticeship and their everyday experiences as (self-)employed practitioners. The analysis of the narrative interviews reveals two aspects, which all tattooists address either directly or indirectly.

### *Professionalising in tattooing*

Since tattooing is not a formalised and recognised career, advantages such as financial security, promotion prospects and social recognition - often decisive criteria for a career choice - are missing. Therefore, it is rare that young people take up tattooing as gainful work directly after they finish school. All interviewees had been trained and worked in another profession prior to their career as tattoo artists, had gathered professional experiences and possessed a recognised qualification - "just in case" - as some interviewees put it. Also, all respondents recalled that they realised at some point that they do not want to work "forever" in their job, but at the same time they considered choosing an occupation that did not require a vocational training and a recognised qualification might cause financial and/or social difficulties. Most tattooists recalled their love of and/or talent for drawing and sketching as a reason, why they searched for an occupation in the art sector, which eventually sparked their interest in tattooing. One interviewee recalls:

Well, the reason I started tattooing was definitively my love for tattoos. I was hooked by the material - the imagination to scribble on the skin, the technique itself fascinated me - I was interested in learning how it works. (M, 47)

This tattoo artist, who has been in the tattooing business for over 25 years, states his attraction to the skin as a work material and claims his interest was mainly technical although he admits his emotional motivation as well. The skin as a canvas for experimentation (to scribble) attracted him, and he pursued a "learning-by-doing" process.

All tattooists describe the skin as a challenging material which they needed to learn about, since the texture of the skin is determined by age, thickness and sex, all of which must be taken into consideration when deciding on the size and placing of a tattoo. Tattooists, who have not experienced it themselves (when getting tattooed themselves)<sup>20</sup>, learn at the latest that tattooing on ribs, ankles or the instep is particularly painful, when their customers groan with pain. Failed tattoos, skin irritation or excessive bleeding are common experiences for beginners and referred to as important "lessons" in the narratives since their mistakes taught them what kind of motifs can be placed on which body part<sup>21</sup> and/or how deep they must stitch. Comments such as "no one was born a master" and "learning never stops" compare tattooing to a classical apprenticeship:

Tattooing simply is a handcraft, which you just learn like a carpenter learns how to work with wood. (M, 32)

<sup>20</sup> Most of the tattooists, whom I met in tattoo parlours are tattooed themselves. In the interviews, the respondents confirmed that only a few tattooists do not have any tattoos.

<sup>21</sup> According to the interviewees, the skin texture of the body parts varies. Particularly care is required when choosing motives for round limbs, such as arms, wrists or ankles.

The comparison with a traditional craft that in Germany requires a three-year-long training period and leads to a recognised qualification implies that tattooing should be considered as a craft that requires not only specific knowledge, but also tuition. However, the same tattooist takes this argument even further:

One must also consider that you're working on the organ of a living human– the biggest organ! Not just a piece of paper, which you can chuck out. (M, 32)

By contrasting tattooing with drawing on paper, the interviewee depicts his craft as demanding and sophisticated. Tattooists have to work with extreme accuracy and meticulous (hygienic) care – every insertion must be exact. As outlined above, working with people means dealing with complexity and as each client (and his skin) is different, it is unpredictable whether the tattoo turns out exactly as desired. In this context, Champy's (2018) concept of "prudential professionalism" is instructive as it points exactly at this "irreducible uncertainty", which requires "practical wisdom" through work experience. In fact, most tattooists claim to have some basic dermatological knowledge, which only helps to some extent as the texture of skin is infinitely variable. In this context several interviewees suggested similarities to the work of medical practitioners, exemplified is this statement:

It's not like you can learn to tattoo in a weekend course, just as no physician can operate after a year of studying. It requires a long process of learning; best is to find a tattoo studio, which is of course not so easy, because only a few tattoo artists take apprentices. (M, 47)

It is noticeable that he compares tattooing with studying medicine and becoming a medical practitioner, a classic profession, which is renowned for its long and demanding professionalisation. Thus, he suggests that professionalising in tattooing requires not only time but also tuition. Most tattoo artists begin their tattooing 'career' as autodidacts, and some shared their early experiments with handmade tattooing devices and ordinary sewing needles. The decision to look for someone, who introduces them to the craft, is depicted as a turning point and an act of responsibility in their narratives. An apprentice, who started with self-tattooing as a teenager, admits:

I had no idea what I was doing. At some point, I told myself: «Enough, I don't want to butcher any more people. I've got to find someone, who shows me properly what to do». (M, 28)

The respondent frames his decision to find a "master"<sup>22</sup> and commit himself to a period of professionalisation, which is not imposed "from above", as an act of taking responsibility for his future clients. The autonomy to organise how and where they learn their craft and to determine the beginning and end of their apprenticeship counts for many tattooists as one of the most attractive aspects of their non-regulated work. Professionalising in tattooing consists primarily of "on-the-job learning" in different studios, and whoever can afford it, goes abroad for some time. Gaining work experience and specialising in tattoo-styles determines whether tattoo artists identify themselves primarily as an artist, craftsman and/or a body service worker. Tattoo conventions serve as a stage, where tattooists demonstrate their technique and artistic style in public, which in some ways resembles an exam setting, since the painful tattooing procedure is exposed to external judgement and public recognition counts as a form of symbolic capital. After all, apart from experiencing being part of a professional community, self-marketing and networking go hand in hand at conventions.

### *Professionalism in everyday practice*

Once tattoo artists have finished their apprenticeship, they either stay in the shop where they were trained or leave to open their own studio. Running a studio and making a living from tattooing requires some basic knowl-

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<sup>22</sup> Many tattoo artists refer to the people, who taught them tattooing as "masters" thus suggesting a novice-master-relationship.

edge of accountancy, which several interviewees described as their hardest challenge and they elaborated about how they accumulated know-how on bookkeeping and taxes.

Usually, tattoo artists specialise in one or more artistic tattoo styles and to try to get a regular clientele. One young tattooist, who opened his studio only a few months before the interview, explained, what he is trying to achieve in future years:

I actually want that clients choose me, because they value my work. The ones, who come and say: Hey, I looked at various studios, and you are doing the best work. (M, 28)

Prior to this statement, he had sought to distinguish himself from those tattooists, who are ready to “ink” whatever their customers want, which is not where he wants to end up. At the same time, he has to compete against them since customers have a choice. His somewhat ambitious “business plan” is based on his artistic talent and skilled artwork that will single him out as an outstanding artist. The quote above shows that this young man’s professional identity relies on social recognition and is connected to artistic quality.

The interview extract below (from a different interviewee) highlights a quite different aspect:

[...] you’ve got to handle the whole thing properly and make a good fist of it, you know, to do the whole thing professionally and not just tattoo some rubbish or whatever, no, this craft you have to carry out cleanly and well, you know [...] we try to introduce compulsory standards for hygiene and the quality of tattoos. (M, 47)

This tattoo artist, who has been in the tattooing business for almost thirty years, not only demands hygiene-guidelines, but also entitles himself the right to set standards and to judge the (un-)professional work of others. His firmness suggests that he is convinced to meet these targets, whereas others do not, which shows his self-confidence as a professional. Thus, his distancing and distinguishing himself from those, whose work he despises as “rubbish” and considers as “scratchers” highlights that he is aware of his responsibility towards his clientele and commits himself to ethical values. Othering and downgrading are rhetorical strategies, which all interviewees employ, to suggest they recognise the “bad seeds”, because they know what quality is:

But – (deep breath) because there’re too many backyard-tattooists, who have never learned the craft or just on YouTube. They’ve got no idea, but think tattooing is cool now, order a machine on the internet and then cause much harm. (M, 27)

Although there seems to be some overall guidelines and rules concerning hygiene and work ethics, which most tattooists commit themselves to, on a micro-level they establish their own standards and benchmarks for their professional practice. Here, the process of professionalisation serves as a criterion to draw boundaries between “good” and “bad”. The “others” are autodidacts, who neither care about the quality of their work nor their responsibility. Instead, their motivation is self-centred (tattooing is “cool”) and egoistic, which suggests that the narrator dedicates himself to the craft of tattooing for the sake of it.

The examples show how tattoo artists use notions of professionalism as discursive formations (Adam 2012) to position themselves within the competitive field of tattooing. In their self-presentation they define their professional identity through rhetorical strategies such as “othering”, assessing and evaluating the work of others against their self-imposed benchmarks.

Tattooing is a specific form of front-line service work (Frenkel *et alii* 1990) and counts within the segment as bodywork (Gimlin 2007). As high-touch work (Mc Dowell 2009), it involves physical closeness, skin contact and touch, which means that the service product consists not only of the finished tattoo, but also the tattooing procedure itself. Drawing on numerous examples from their everyday practice, the investment of time and affective capital (Penz, Sauer 2010) in their interactions with customers is illustrated and compared with similar requirements in recognised body service work, for example in the health and care work sector. For example, in this description:

There are still many people, who sneer at you and say: «Tattoo artist? Hmm. Nothing else achieved in life!». You’re just scribbling around on people’s skin and taking money for it. [...] This pigeonholing – you’re just like drug dealers or pimps for them. But a job

like tattooing is also demanding and exhausting: you've got to be nice with your clients, you can't just sneer at them, you must always be sensible about what suits them, what is appropriate, to make them feel comfortable. [...] (F, 35)

With reference to stereotypes that tattooists are either confronted with or just anticipating, this interviewee feels that she has to clarify that she commits herself to the principles of service work by illustrating her emotion work (Hochschild 1983; Black 2004) with classic examples and legitimize her status as a professional service provider, including the exhausting nature of her bodywork.

The initial consultation and negotiating about the desired tattoo is often depicted as an expert-client relationship, where the tattoo artist seeks to develop the "best" tattoo "solution" with the customer. The intimacy of the conversations, which can get very personal (and depressing) when clients are lying on a lounger for hours in pain – a position that triggers talking and getting emotional. The challenge of coping with traumatised and/or simply talkative costumers and their stories<sup>23</sup> requires a professional framing of the intimate situation. As an invasive treatment of the skin, the tattooing act is often described by customers and service providers alike as a physical transgression of the "territories of the self" (Goffman 1971) thus interpreting it as "entering" the inner life of a person (Bidlo 2010). All interviewees stress this side of their work as a form of emotion labour that goes beyond the service contract and is considered as challenging as psychological and/or psychiatric counselling. The comparison with recognised professions, which involve a long academic education and work experience seeks to upgrade and legitimize tattooing as an occupation, which also requires a professional habitus and the competence to frame physical closeness and intimacy in a "professional" way. In this context, this means conveying that they care without getting personally involved.

## CONCLUSIONS

Tattoo artists are confronted with increasing competition and, at the same time, they are challenged to convince the concerned public of their professional conduct despite the lack of formal education and recognised credentials. By referring to the safety and health risks of their skin-invasive bodywork, they stress the responsibility and complexity of tattooing, which they tend to compare with medical practices. Furthermore, the tattoo boom generated an increasing demand, but also led to an individualisation of the tattoo as a symbol of individuality. Personalised and unique tattoos are in great demand and require artistic expertise and meticulous craft work. In their accounts, tattoo artists describe how they have to meet high standards of artistic and craft skills as well as the clientele's expectations of good service quality (e.g. good hygiene, expert consultations), which requires their self-managed and time-consuming professionalisation.

The reconstruction of argumentative referents from the empirical material also indicates that professionalism operates as a "discursive formation" (Adam 2012) among tattooists. Frequently, they describe aspects of their professional identity by contrasting it with an "unprofessional other", the "scratcher", who matches all prejudices and stereotypes and is, therefore, the "bad seed" in the tattooing community. In this context notions of professionalism become evident through rhetoric strategies such as "othering", assessing, judging, which are employed as a means of occupational closure.

To conclude, although tattoo artists are ambivalent about a formalised and institutionalised process of professionalisation "from above", they individually adopt professionalism as a concept to construct their professional identity. Eventually, their professional self-understanding as artists, artisans and/or service workers is based on their boundary work (O'Mahony 2013), which helps them to position themselves within a growing and competitive occupational field.

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<sup>23</sup> All interviewees stated that, over the last decade, the demand for tattoos as a creed or symbol for grief, internal or status passages has increased considerably.

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