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"Always an Imam": Understanding the Occupation of Imam from Theoretical Perspectives on Professions

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Abstract: In this article, the occupation of the imam is analysed using a profession-theoretical approach. Following Oevermann, we view professionalised action as a relational practice, characterised by a paradoxical unity of diffuseness and specificity. Drawing on empirical data on imams in Switzerland, we highlight several factors that contribute to a shift towards more diffuse social relationships between professionals and their clients: task-specific boundaries become blurred, and temporal and spatial limits break down. These factors help to explain why imams in Switzerland report feeling stressed and overburdened. We argue that the role of the imam can, in principle, be conceptualised as a profession. From the perspective of a power approach to professions, however, the concept of profession can only be applied to the occupation of an imam to a limited extent, as it is not universal, but remains reserved for men.

Keywords: imams; Switzerland; profession theory; power approach to professions; diffuseness; professionalisation; stress

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of this article stands the empirical observation that imams working in Switzerland report feeling overburdened and stressed (Trucco, forthcoming). The term "imam" refers here to the most commonly used meaning of the Arabic word *imām* today: the leader of a Muslim community or the person who leads prayers (Hashas et al. 2018, pp. 20–21). According to widespread views, imams are typically men as there are hegemonic discourses within Islam that prevent women from, for example, leading prayers in mixed-gender congregations or delivering the Friday sermon (Petersen 2019, p. 159). If we use the term "imam", we therefore speak of male imams but will reflect on this aspect below. In Switzerland, just over 130 imams regularly serve as religious experts in Muslim communities over an extended period (Schmid and Trucco 2019, p. 7). Many Muslim communities in Switzerland are still organised by language, due to the history of migration. In Switzerland, the most common communities where imams are employed are Arabic-speaking, Albanian-speaking, Bosnian-speaking, and Turkish-speaking Muslim communities (Schmid and Trucco 2019; Schmid et al. 2022).

While there are a number of mostly psychological studies examining stress and burnout in relation to the role of Christian clergy (Clarke et al. 2023; Frederick et al. 2023; Hill et al. 2003; Pooler 2011; Proeschold-Bell et al. 2015; Rosendahl and Rosendahl 2022), stress and burnout among imams represents a research gap. What studies on imams show, however, is that the role of the imam in Western contexts has increasingly expanded and now includes tasks such as counselling, media work, or interreligious dialogue (Ali 2018, p. 300; Hafiz 2015, p. 92; Sunier 2023, pp. 75–76). In addition, high expectations are placed on imams, both by members of Muslim communities (e.g., Schmid 2020, p. 78) and by society (e.g., Trucco, forthcoming). In short, an expansion of the role of the imam can be observed, which carries high expectations. We have therefore chosen to examine the occupation of the imam from a profession-theoretical approach.[1] This allows us to examine

which structural issues within the occupation of the imam as a religious profession underlie reports of feeling stressed and overburdened.

The term "professionalisation" already appears in a handful of studies on imams: Asim Hafiz (2015, p. 93) notes that imams often neither "interact with a professional community", nor are they "accustomed to professional practices". Mansur Ali (2018, p. 304) observes that Muslim chaplains criticise the imams' perceived lack of professionalism, and data from the research project #ImamsBritain shows that when interviewed, imams themselves "perceive that their work in mosques and Muslim communities today lacks professional status and training" (Hough et al. 2021, p. 12). A specific professional deficit is therefore identified. Expressed more positively, a professionalisation could lead to a greater valorisation of the imam's role. Accordingly, training programmes for the professionalisation of imams are being developed in some European countries (e.g., for the Netherlands, see Boender 2021). John H. Morgan (2010, p. 125) even goes so far as to claim that "Muslim clergy in western society are becoming more professional every day" and that this process is "incontrovertible and irreversible".

It thus makes sense to study imams from profession-theoretical perspectives. We will examine, firstly, whether and in what sense the occupation of the imam can be seen as a profession in modern terms[2], and explain some structural components of imam activity from a profession-theoretical perspective (Section 2). We will then discuss the methodological approach to the data on which this article is based (Section 3) and subsequently address how these structural components are reflected in the empirical data (Section 4), before concluding with some additional reflections based on a power-approach to professions (Section 5).

2. Profession-Theoretical Approach

While medical practitioners and lawyers are frequently the subject of sociological studies of professions, there have hardly been any specific studies of religious professions (Krech and Höhmann 2005, p. 201; Sammet 2018, p. 552). In order to answer the question of whether the occupation of an imam can be understood as a profession in the modern sense, it is first necessary to explain what is meant by a profession as a particular occupational form. In a minimal definition, professions include those occupations that have systematic knowledge, claim a monopoly over certain services, are oriented towards a professional ethic, focus on the common good and have control over access to the profession and the activities of its members (Schmeiser 2006, p. 301; Hesse 1968). The specific knowledge includes more or less abstract categories that are applied in different situations. Professions are considered responsible when a problem faced by individuals in a specific life context cannot be solved without specialised knowledge. However, due to discrepancies between available knowledge and specific situational contexts of action, the structure of professional action is based on inherent uncertainty (Stichweh 1994, p. 297), which must be compensated for by the personal characteristics of its professional actors—such as intuition, judgement, willingness to take risks and acceptance of responsibility.

Ulrich Oevermann (1996, p. 70) describes how to deal with this structural uncertainty in his text "revised theory of professionalised action" [*revidierte Theorie professionalisierten Handelns*; translation by the authors]. In doing so, he builds on Parsons' (1939) classic profession theory. He develops a model of professional action that is fundamentally conceived of as a service and can only be standardised to a limited extent (Oevermann 2009, pp. 116–17). This relates to a life practice in crisis. On one hand, this professional activity, referred to as "vicarious crisis management" takes place through scientifically methodized expertise (Schmeiser 2006, p. 304). On the other, knowledge must be "translated" for each specific case and therefore cannot be standardised. Non-standardised and non-routine crisis solutions are therefore fundamentally necessary, with problem cases being interpreted with recourse to the professionals' specialist and experiential knowledge. These cannot be developed using prefabricated schemes (Pfadenhauer 2003, p. 42). At the level of professional practice, Oevermann understands professionalised action specifically as

relational practice. It is characterised by a contradictory unity of diffuseness and specificity, whereby these two logics of action are structurally mutually exclusive (Oevermann 1996, p. 110).

Specific social relationships are characterised by their role-based nature: they are institutionally embedded, limited in time and space, follow a fixed action pattern and are oriented towards clearly defined goals. The relationship structure between professionals and clients also remains the same, even if there is a change of personnel (Oevermann 1996, p. 110). In terms of content, the professionals' tasks and duties are narrowly defined, limiting the topics of communication and clearly framing the interaction. The functional specificity of role behaviour also means it is not focused on the entire person (e.g., the client) in their personal and private aspects, but on the specific sections of the person that are closely related to their concerns (Helsper 2021, p. 63). According to this model, the relationship between professionals and clients is determined by specific parts of the relationship as related to a clearly defined professional role.

However, in this understanding of profession, professionalism cannot be based solely on the formal requirements of the professional role. Rather, a constitutive structural element of professional behaviour is that it is characterised by specific role patterns, and also permeated by non-role-shaped, family-like and sometimes unconscious relationship patterns.

Diffuse social relationships, therefore, describe a type of interaction in which personal and affective aspects are central. They are characterised by a certain vagueness and non-specificity of expectations and patterns of behaviour oriented towards individuals as a whole. In this less formalised and regulated logic of action, the boundaries of professional–client interaction are less strictly defined and, in principle, anything can be discussed. Clients develop trust in professional actors precisely when and because they not only act in a role-based manner, but also respond to a particular situation with comparatively diffuse and interactional behaviour. Clients therefore do not feel treated as a "case of". Clients are perceived as whole persons and essentially autonomous individuals in a particular situation and thus develop trust in the professional actors (Krech and Höhmann 2005, p. 203). The professional challenge therefore particularly consists of mediating the specific and diffuse social relationships in an appropriate manner.

Ulrich Oevermann's (1996) theory of professionalised action was developed on the basis of a non-religious profession, namely that of therapists, and transferred to the field of religion by other authors (e.g., Krech 2011; Krech and Höhmann 2005; Sammet 2018; Schützeichel 2007). Krech and Höhmann (2005), for example, were able to identify the structural feature of contradictory unity between simultaneously specific and diffuse relationship components in the pastoral profession. The authors outline various structural problems of pastoral work (ibid., pp. 206–7). They state, among other things, that pastoral work is increasingly shifting towards diffuse relationship components in the relationship between professionals and clients. Based on this, our thesis in this article is that a similar shift can be observed with regard to the imams' actions. Based on empirical material on imams in Switzerland (cf. Trucco, forthcoming), we analyse various aspects that have led to a shift towards more diffuse social relationships.

3. Method

The data on which this article is based comes from a more extensive research project on the subjectivation of imams in Switzerland (Trucco, forthcoming), situated within the field of empirical subjectivation research (Bosančić et al. 2022a, 2022b). In this context, problem-centred interviews were conducted with imams in Switzerland. In the following, we will first outline the methodological steps of data collection and analysis before presenting how they were actually implemented.

3.1. Methodological Steps of Data Collection and Analysis

Problem-centred interviews facilitate "a conversation structure that helps to uncover the actual perspectives of individuals on a particular problem in a systematic and dialogical

way" (Witzel and Reiter 2012, p. 24). They draw on the researcher's prior knowledge in the form of sensitising concepts (Blumer 1954), by encouraging the interviewees to share narratives, while also asking follow-up questions to elicit further details. The problem-centred interview has three basic characteristics: firstly, problem centring refers to a socially relevant issue. Secondly, the principle of object orientation means that it is necessary to demonstrate that the method used is appropriate for the research issue at hand. Thirdly, it is process-oriented (Witzel and Reiter 2012, pp. 26–29). It therefore stands in the tradition of the Grounded Theory Approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Rather than following fixed phases, it goes along with the course of the conversation, seeking to stimulate understanding processes among the researchers during the interview itself. The interview guide resembles more of a conversation thread, in which thematic fields are noted for orientation to ensure some comparability between interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2012, pp. 50–51). The opening question must be general and open enough for the interviewees to elaborate narratively. At the same time, it should guide the conversation towards the problem under investigation (Witzel and Reiter 2012, pp. 68–69). The interview is recorded, and a postscript is written. Additionally, a short questionnaire is used after the interview to gather social characteristics.

In the next step, the transcribed interviews are analysed. A combination of sequential analysis in the tradition of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (cf. Maiwald 2005, para. 30–41)[3] and Grounded Theory methodology is used (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Such methodological references, including Grounded Theory, are common within empirical subjectivation research (cf. Pokitsch 2022, p. 156). During open coding, concepts are identified and developed through questioning and comparison (Strauss and Corbin 1998, pp. 222–39). This is followed by axial coding, where individual categories are further developed based on their properties and dimensions (Strauss and Corbin 1998, pp. 240–63). The coding process is accompanied by memos and comments. Selected key parts of the interview are then sequentially analysed. Through sequential analysis, the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge aims to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and develop an attitude from which one is willing to abandon old convictions and develop new ones that have a greater capacity for integration (Reichertz and Schröer 1994, p. 75). This is conducted collaboratively with other researchers, to avoid hasty interpretations and biases arising from the researcher's unavoidable prior knowledge.

3.2. Implementation of the Methodological Steps

Overall, fifteen interviews were conducted with male imams. The selection of interviewees was based on a purposeful sampling (Patton 2002, pp. 230–42). Its aim was to achieve the greatest possible heterogeneity of cases (according to characteristics such as age, language, employment status etc.). However, one common characteristic underpinned the sample: all participants were Sunni imams, as 85% of Muslims in Switzerland are Sunni (Schneuwly Purdie and Tunger-Zanetti 2023, p. 678). Five Albanian-speaking, five Turkish-speaking, four Arabic-speaking, and one Bosnian-speaking imam were interviewed. Unfortunately, despite considerable effort and multiple follow-ups, it was not possible to recruit another Bosnian-speaking imam for an interview, which points to difficulties in field access in regard to Bosnian-speaking imams. Of the fifteen imams interviewed, five come from the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Among them are three of the four Arabic-speaking imams, which reflects the stronger representation of Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East in French-speaking Switzerland. The ages of the imams at the time of the interviews ranged from 32 to 66 years, covering a broad age spectrum. Most of the imams interviewed are employed full-time by their associations. However, one imam works 80% (0.8 FTE) in another profession and is only employed as an imam for 20% (0.2 FTE). There was also a volunteer imam and three imams employed and paid through the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, *Diyanet*, in the sample. Regarding education, one could almost speak of an emerging standard (Schmid and Trucco 2019, p. 50): most imams have completed at least a bachelor's degree in theology. Only three imams had

not undertaken any theological studies. One was trained through personal knowledge transfer from teacher to student (*iğāza*, a license that authorizes its holder to transmit Islamic religious knowledge as a historically long-standing form of knowledge transmission). The other two are largely self-taught, although one of them has attended a course in Quran recitation in France. Additionally, an imam born and raised in Switzerland was interviewed, who completed the international theology program (*Uluslararası İlahiyat Programı*) in Turkey, specifically designed for second and third generation Turks living abroad. He is employed and paid by *Diyanet*. The desired goal of interviewing a broad diversity of male Sunni imams, thus achieving maximum variation, has therefore been achieved.

The interview guide was created based on prior knowledge. The opening question—"Please tell me: What do you do as an imam?" (originally in German and French)—is open-ended to ensure direct entry into the daily tasks and activities of an imam, while simultaneously allowing interviewees to address their own relevant topics. Most interviewees spoke French or Standard German, but two interviews were conducted in Swiss German. All interview passages used in this article have been translated into English.

The coding of the interviews was carried out in MAXQDA 2022. In addition, the opening sequences and other sequences perceived as important, contradictory or unambiguous were analysed using sequential analysis, either in collaboration with an assistant or in an interpretation group. Memos of these interpretation sessions were created and later transferred into MAXQDA 2022. For this article, excerpts from interviews were used that relate to the imams' overload and stress, thus forming a coded category with distinct dimensions that emerged from the material (for all other results of the analysis, see Trucco, forthcoming).

4. Findings: A Shift Towards Diffuse Social Relationships

As discussed in the theoretical section, we understand professionalised action as a relational practice characterised by a paradoxical unity of diffuseness and specificity, according to Oevermann. We argue that imams' actions are increasingly shifting towards diffuse relationship components in the relationship between the professional and clients. Activities that Krech and Höhmann (2005, p. 204) summarise as "proclamation" [*Verkündigung*] for the pastoral profession, such as leading daily prayers, delivering the Friday sermon, giving religious instruction, answering religious questions and performing rites at birth, marriage and death, belong to the specific role-based side of the imam profession (cf. Hafiz 2015, p. 96). As already mentioned in the introduction, there has been an expansion of imams' tasks in the Western context (cf. Hafiz 2015, p. 92). Accordingly, there are additional areas of responsibility that Krech and Höhmann (2005, p. 204) primarily summarise as "accompaniment" [*Begleitung*], in which diffuse professional action manifests itself: social work counselling, chaplaincy[4], youth work, public relations or interreligious dialogue (cf. Müller 2017, p. 76; Schmid 2020).

Therefore, some imams make a distinction between the "actual" duties of an imam and additional tasks or argue that they are not just imams in Switzerland: "I'm a chaplain, in various cases also a family counsellor, sometimes also a social worker", says Mr B. (lines 23–24). The imams point out that, in their opinion, the narrower scope of duties corresponds to the role of the imam in Muslim countries, while in Switzerland the role is expanded: "In Bosnia, my work is very limited and specific. Mostly religious things. Here, it's not" (Mr K., lines 211–212). This could be interpreted as an idealisation of the working conditions of imams in Muslim countries. However, it must be noted at this point that all the imams quoted in this article completed their studies in Muslim countries and, in this context, also served as substitute imams or interns in mosques. Some of the interviewed imams, such as Mr C. and Mr K., have also worked as imams in their countries of origin for several years and are therefore familiar with the imams' working conditions. According to the imams, one of the reasons for the narrower scope of duties is that in many Muslim countries, there is a division of tasks within mosques, due to stronger ties to the state or

stronger institutionalisation, so that the imam is mainly responsible for the religious sphere. He leads prayers and gives the sermon, while other tasks are carried out by other people:

> In Turkey, the tasks are allocated. The imam is in the mosque, leads the prayers, keeps the mosque clean and is like a caretaker. He also delivers his sermon, but he is not responsible for religious education, for example. He is not responsible for funerals. He is not responsible for big sermons. He is not responsible for chaplaincy in prisons and general chaplaincy. Of course, it is desirable, but it is all allocated, isn't it? Everyone knows what their task is. (Mr I., lines 182–190)

The lack of recognition under public law in Switzerland (Süess and de Mortanges 2017), which can be considered structurally unequal treatment compared to other religious communities (humanrights.ch 2023), means that at a cantonal level Muslim organisations are unable to collect taxes from their members, are mostly financed through membership fees and donations and are largely dependent on volunteer work (cf. Baumann et al. 2020, pp. 63–65). Accordingly, a division of tasks within mosque associations in Switzerland is hardly possible beyond a certain amount of voluntary work: the imam is often the only paid employee of a mosque association (Trucco et al. 2024, p. 8). We will revisit this aspect in Section 5. At this point, it is sufficient to say that the expansion of the imams' tasks causes a shift towards more diffuse social relationships.

In addition to task-specific boundary dissolution, two further forms of limit-blurring lead to an intensification of the existing profession-theoretical contradiction between diffuseness and role action. The first one is a blurring of temporal limits (cf. Ali 2018, p. 300), as Mr C. (line 74) points out: "I have to be available at all times, people call me, sometimes at night". This temporal limit-blurring is, on one hand, related to community expectations, as Mr A. (lines 298–301) summarises: "And that one day a week is free—[the community would prefer] zero days, that the imam is always there, day and night, and that he is available, by phone, until one o'clock or two o'clock at night". This ties in with what was mentioned above: in mosque associations in Switzerland, there are often no additional employees besides the imam for financial reasons. This is also related to associations being small in size (cf. Baumann et al. 2020, p. 60). On the other hand, the working hours of an imam are also flexible because prayer times, which are derived from astronomical phenomena such as the position of the sun (Wiedemann and Frank 1926, p. 3), change throughout the year.

The second form is a blurring of spatial limits, or lack of separation between the professional role and private life. Many imams are provided with housing by the community, often in the same building as the mosque association. As Mr K. explains: "I live here. That is also a difficulty//Interviewer: Yes//People sit here and check what I'm doing outside or what my children are doing" (Mr K., lines 242–243). The lack of spatial dislimitation leads to social control, as certain behavioural expectations are placed on an imam. This reinforces the lack of separation between the imam's professional role and private life. In another statement by Mr K., this is evident:

> You are the imam now and on the street, in the mountains, at home, always an imam. And our people are watching us—my children, my wife, me, my car, my house, my clothes, my conversations, my appearance—everything, they are watching (drums with his fingers on the table). That is also a difficulty, yes. (Mr K., lines 104–107)

Mr K. is expressing here that he is seen as the imam in every situation and cannot set aside the role, even in his private life. The pressure that can arise from these expectations becomes particularly evident through his seemingly endless enumeration. The community thus expects a certain congruence between an imam's professional and personal life, which extends particularly to his family. As Mr. A. (lines 490–493) explains: "Among Muslims, the imam's son is viewed as if he were an imam himself. This means that the imam should reserve as much energy as possible to properly manage his family and ideally set an example with his children in public".

Another factor behind the shift towards diffuse social relationships is that the actions of an imam do not take place within the framework of a professional–client interaction, but rather in the context of a congregation, which always includes elements of communalisation (Trucco et al. 2024) or diffuse belonging. In this sense, the actions of an imam are typically embedded in a specific religious and social milieu (cf. Hafiz 2015, p. 93). In addition, the position of the imam is often characterised by a contradiction, as he is expected to lead the community, yet is simultaneously remunerated by it: "I am paid by the income and contributions of the members of my congregation", says Mr O. (lines 420–21). This is due to the situation of religious law in the European context where the mosque association often emerges as a private law association with statutes (Tezcan 2008, pp. 122–24). Accordingly, in many cases, the imam reports to the board of the association (cf. El-Yousfi 2019; Aslan et al. 2015, pp. 322–23). This means that community members are clients and indirect employers at the same time (cf. Hough et al. 2021), leading to an erosion of the boundaries that define the imam's specific professional role. Another challenge lies in the fact that the imam operates as an intermediary between a mosque organisation and individual problems (similar to the role of a pastor, see Krech 2011, p. 83). On one hand, the imam is embedded in the formal organisational field and must adhere to an organisational logic, such as compliance with the mosque's established protocols, governance structures and community expectations. On the other, his actions are oriented towards individuals and aim to address their unique concerns. Consequently, the imam faces the challenge of meeting diverse needs within the constraints of organisational frameworks.

Another reason for the shift in the imam's actions towards diffuse relationship components seems to lie in the training situation for imams, as they are often inadequately prepared to act as imams in practice (Anskar 2021, p. 95; for a historical derivation, see Zaman 2002, pp. 60–68; for a suggestion of minimal requirements for training, see Vinding and Chbib 2020, p. 40). Mr B., for example, states that imams need to study theology, but "actually more, because the expectations here are higher than down in Macedonia, Kosovo, etc. And that's why [the imam] should be much, much better prepared, meaning theologically, but also pedagogically and professionally, I mean. For so many duties that need to be fulfilled" (Mr B., lines 113–116). In particular, there is a lack of practical knowledge and appropriate application methods, among other things (cf. Ceylan 2019, pp. 15–20). Mr B. explains further:

> There was a separation [of the study programmes, note by the authors] [...] for other tasks, we have to learn something ourselves. Muslim chaplaincy doesn't exist in the Islamic world. Only now is it slowly emerging in Turkey, yes. Social work, yes, but that's not done by imams. That's done by social workers [...]. So we have to take action ourselves, through further education, workshops, or similar, studying on our own. (Mr B., lines 137–142)

Until relatively recently, and still in many areas today, imams attended only a religious secondary school (such as İmam-Hatip Schools in Turkey or madrasas in India), meaning that university education for imams is a relatively new concept (Sikand 2005; Zengin and Hendek 2023). Since relevant academic programs are still almost exclusively offered in Muslim countries, most of the imams working in Switzerland who hold a corresponding university degree have studied abroad (Schmid and Trucco 2019). There is not only a discrepancy between academic programs and work situations of imams in general, but also a gap between the study context and the later work context, as the duties of an imam in Muslim countries and in the Western context, as shown previously, often differ significantly.

As a result, the work of an imam increasingly shifts from specific role-based tasks to more diffuse activities, where religious expertise is applied less methodically and depends on the situation. Instead, clients are "accompanied", for instance, in spiritual care, social work counselling or youth work. However, these interaction-oriented fields of work are not sufficiently distinct from the roles of a social worker or chaplain. Consequently, the

imam is increasingly becoming a "generalist": "Here, the imam is the person who does everything," says Mr I. (lines 192–193).

5. The Occupation of Imam: A Limited Profession?

We have now explained various aspects that cause a shift in imams' actions towards greater diffuseness in the relationship between the professional and client. At the same time, we argue that a key feature of the imam profession is that it must balance conflicting challenges between diffuse and role-based action. In addition to the ever-increasing proportion of diffuse relationship components of professional action, this results in the imams being overworked and stressed: "And that sometimes also causes problems, that my work as an imam is always stressful, always tough" (Mr C., lines 72–73). Or as Mr A. explains:

> To this day, for 22 years, I have taken it all in my stride. And even today, there is never a time when I do not pick up the phone and respond quickly. There's never a time when the chaplaincy service from the cantonal hospital calls, even if it's at midnight, that I do not respond quickly. Now either, as I said, I've slowly lost the energy or I've got too old or something or the job is actually too much for me or I don't know, but now I'm slowly trying to talk to the board, these activities need to be defined. (Mr A., lines 310–317)

By applying Oevermann's profession theory to the occupation of the imam and illustrating it with empirical examples, we have demonstrated that the work of an imam can, in principle, be conceptualised as a profession within this framework. At the same time, we have identified various challenges that complicate the mediation between diffuse and specific components of action, resulting in what can be described as a limited professional status.

A further finding, grounded in a power approach to professions (Freidson 1975; Larson 1977), is worth highlighting, as it restricts the applicability of the term 'profession' to the religious position of the imam. For sociological professions, the fulfilment of function and the necessary training and competence required for the role are critical criteria for professional work. Professions are universal in the sense that external characteristics, such as origin or gender, should play no role in gaining access to a profession. However, religious professions differ in this respect: they are almost exclusively reserved for men. Only in Protestantism and Judaism have developments since the second half of the 20th century led to the opening of religious roles for women (Sammet 2018, p. 559). The question, therefore, arises regarding the occupation of imam, as to how to deal with gender-exclusive access to this role, as well as the related processes of exclusion and inclusion and their legitimations.

The power approach may highlight that masculinity is an essential prerequisite for access to a Muslim role associated with leadership functions (cf. Sunier 2023, pp. 149–50), and correspondingly, femininity becomes a criterion for the systematic exclusion of women (although Simonetta Calderini (2021) has shown that there are different, non-hegemonic inner-Muslim perspectives on the question of female imams). In Switzerland, this is further exacerbated by the fact that Muslim communities are small and have limited financial resources to employ additional staff alongside the imam (Trucco et al. 2024, p. 8). Moreover, the legal admission requirements for individuals from third countries (i.e., non-EU/EFTA countries) who wish to work as imams and pastors in Switzerland stipulate that only the central spiritual and ritual leader can be admitted (State Secretariat for Migration SEM 2013, p. 111). This presents an additional barrier for women, as women are not permitted to assume all the duties of an imam and therefore cannot become the central religious leader. As a result, women from third countries cannot be admitted as Muslim spiritual leaders in Switzerland, since no additional religious leadership positions are approved.

Furthermore, the power approach reveals that the imam role is complemented by a form of integration of individual women into institutional roles or functions, which is contingent upon their subordination to men. This situation can be described as discriminatory because, while Muslim women are assigned system-relevant caregiving tasks (e.g., organising community events), they are excluded from key matters, strategically

important positions and central decisions within the mosque (Dehbi 2023, p. 11). In system–theoretical terms, this means that the inclusion of women is only permitted in complementary roles (as laypersons) or in "sub-professional" groups that assist in the execution of tasks (Stichweh 1994, p. 366). However, Ayşe Almıla Akça (2020) demonstrated that the desire to lead prayers for other women or mixed-gender congregations and to deliver Friday sermons is not prevalent among women in the mosques she studied in Germany (Akça 2020, p. 241). Nevertheless, she showed that women in the mosque contexts analysed do fight for the following: participation in communal prayers in mosques (such as Friday, festival and funeral prayers), their own space in mosques and religious teaching for women by women. The latter point, in particular, highlights three important aspects: the role of women as learners in the mosque, their status as transmitters of Islamic knowledge and the training of religious expertise, and thus experts. These aspects represent the struggles genuinely driven by women (Akça 2020, p. 241).

The role of women as religious experts has been recognised in certain contexts, as Chiara Maritato (2015, 2016, 2018, 2022) has shown. The Turkish religious authority *Diyanet* has increasingly employed women "as Qur'an teachers, preachers, religious experts and vice-muftis" (Maritato 2018, para. 2) in the last twenty years. On one hand, this shift has to be seen within a broader strategy of diaspora politics "to reach the widest possible audience and propagate the religious conservative ideology abroad" (Maritato 2018, para. 29). In other words, the employment of women is a tool for *Diyanet*. On the other hand, once these women "had been incorporated into the bureaucracy, the perimeter of new women's positions was determined by Islamist men who discourage any attempt at solidarity with women beyond the secular-religious divide" (Maritato 2022, p. 18).

In light of this, the question arises as to whether there is potential for the profession to open up to women if the role of the imam begins to align more closely with the logic of professionalised occupations. Put differently, one might ask whether the inclusion of women in the imam profession could serve to strengthen its professional status.

6. Conclusions

Based on empirical material on imams in Switzerland, we showed that imam work is shifting more and more towards diffuse components in the relationship between professionals and clients. We identified various aspects that have led to this shift. Firstly, we demonstrated that task-specific boundary dissolution is occurring, i.e., an expansion of the imams' tasks to areas of responsibility summarised as "accompaniment". As we pointed out, this is partly related to the legal situation regarding religion in Switzerland and the underfunding of mosque associations. Secondly, we have shown that there is a blurring of temporal limits. This is primarily based on changing prayer times throughout the year but is further reinforced by the community's expectations that the imam should always be available. Thirdly, we observed a blurring of spatial limits or a lack of separation between the professional role and private life. Fourthly, we have shown that the position of the imam is often characterised by a contradiction, as community members are both clients and indirect employers—i.e., as members of the board of the community—at the same time. In addition, an imam must adhere to organisational logic, but his actions are oriented towards individuals and aim to address their unique concerns. And fifthly, there is a lack of practical knowledge in the current Theology study programmes, reinforced by the gap between the study context (Muslim countries) and the work context in Western countries.

By studying the occupation of an imam through the lens of Oevermann's profession theory, we believe that the work of an imam can, in principle, be conceptualised as a profession in the modern sense. Nevertheless, maintaining the balance between diffuse and role-based action proves difficult, due to various complicating conditions and circumstances, resulting in what can only be described as a limited professional status. By incorporating another perspective on professions, namely a power approach to professions, we were able to demonstrate that gender-exclusive access to the role of the imam further

reinforces its limited professional status. We therefore ask whether the inclusion of women in the imam profession could serve to strengthen its professional status.

Here, we identify an important limitation of our contribution: although two women were consulted as part of the larger research project from which the data for this article are derived, their data was not included in this article. It would be crucial to interview more Muslim women within and outside of Muslim communities in order to make more substantial statements on this aspect and to adequately discuss it from their perspective. Another limitation is that we did not examine the perspective of the Muslim communities. The perspective of the clients would be essential for a more in-depth reconstruction of the reciprocal professional–client relationship (cf. Oevermann 2009), in order to avoid the assumption that members of the Muslim communities are passive recipients of religious services.

To tackle the issues identified in our article, we recommend the following: To address the challenge of task-specific boundary dissolution, consideration could be given to granting public law recognition to Muslim communities, or to exploring specific solutions, such as the binding framework pursued by the canton of Zurich to clarify its relationship with non-recognised religious communities (cf. Kanton Zürich 2024). A division of labour could reduce the blurring of temporal limits, although shared responsibilities are closely tied to the issue of finances. Another possibility would be to contractually define the specific duties of an imam—something that is not yet the case in many communities. By further professionalising the role of the imam, the blurring of spatial limits could be addressed, emphasising specific professional competencies rather than the position of the imam being a model for exemplary personal conduct. The dual role of the community members as both clients and indirect employers must be reflected upon, as well as the imam's responsibility for the organisational concerns of the community, if the profession of imam wants to position itself as a profession. The lack of practical knowledge in current Theology programmes is already partly addressed by imam training programmes that are currently being proposed or developed (cf. Boender 2021; Ceylan 2019). To better maintain the balance between diffuse and role-based social relationships, the actions imams take could go in different directions: they may focus strictly on those tasks conceptualised as "proclamation", which would make the function of an imam more of an occupation than a profession. However, this is unlikely to happen due to the circumstances outlined above. Alternatively, the role of the imam needs to be redefined as a modern profession. Yet, this redefinition should be carried out within the Muslim communities themselves and not imposed from the outside (i.e., by a state structure), as similar attempts have led to unintended effects (cf. Peter 2008; Peter 2018; Sözeri et al. 2018).

In conclusion, we believe that the changing role of imams opens up opportunities for rethinking the professionalisation of their occupation, a process that could relieve the pressure on imams and provide a more appropriate response to the needs of Muslim communities in Switzerland.

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Notes

1 The aim of profession theories is to examine the characteristics and logic of professional action and to develop models for more correct, successful or better and thus more professional conduct. Representatives of various professional theoretical approaches agree that professions are distinguished from all other occupations by certain characteristics (Pfadenhauer 2003, p. 32). However, there is ongoing disagreement regarding these characteristics and criteria, which is why the sociology of professions has a long tradition of debate over the relevant features of professions.

2 Historically, professions are considered social institutions that emerged during the transition from pre-modern to modern society as responses to specific problems of modern society (e.g., increasing complexity, differentiation of knowledge, anonymity etc.; Motzke 2014, p. 68). In the course of societal differentiation, key areas of social self-preservation (e.g., education, medicine, religion, law etc.) were increasingly entrusted to specialised institutions with specially trained, and therefore uniquely qualified, personnel who were organised into formal occupations (Schmidt 2008, p. 835).

3 This represents an understanding of sequence analysis that does not correspond to that of objective hermeneutics.

4 While "Islamic counselling" takes place in a therapeutic setting (Abu-Raiya 2015), Muslim chaplaincy work largely takes place either within the Muslim communities themselves or within the confines of various public institutions, such as prisons and hospitals (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013).

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